NON-VIOLENCE: AN ARTICLE OF FAITH

MAHATMA GANDHI MEMORIAL ORATION 2004

ADDRESS BY
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OCTOBER 2, 2004

THE SRI LANKA INDIA SOCIETY

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October 2004

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2, Kynsey Terrace
Colombo 8
Sri Lanka.

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Radhika Coomaraswamy

(The Mahatma Gandhi Oration 2004)

I want to thank the organisers, especially Ms. Nirmala Ragunathan and Mr. Ken Balendra for inviting me to speak here today. I am truly honoured because I am aware of the many luminaries who have spoken before me on this occasion. One was Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam who delivered the oration in 1996. I remember him preparing diligently for his address. I hope I will not let his memory down with my remarks. In this regard I must thank Mrs. Sithie Tiruchelvam for her advice and suggestions which I found very useful in preparing this oration.

Of all the political celebrities in world history, Mahatma Gandhi has had the most profound impact on my political ideas and practice. I do not know whether this was because of my childhood, when an uncle who spent time in India during the Indian National Movement would regale us with inspiring stories about Gandhi, or whether it were the anecdotes about Gandhi that my grandparents would relate about the time he came to Jaffna on the invitation of the Jaffna Youth Congress. I do not know whether it was my days in school and university in the

United States when Martin Luther King led Afro - Americans in an affirmation of their self respect using the methods and ideas of Gandhi or whether it is my experience as an adult in Sri Lanka where the folly of violence is so apparent and the consequences so dire that we do not even want to contemplate its repercussions for the future. Whatever the reason for over fifty years after the Mahatma died, it is Gandhi who stands as the most powerful symbol of all that is good and possible about moral politics.

What did Gandhi stand for? The term Satyagraha perhaps sums it all up. The concept of Sat, drawn from ancient Indian thought is the belief that sacrifice and moral action based on truth releases the forces of good and therefore enables transformation of self and society. This ideology of sacrifice and its transformative potential is extremely radical since it is premised on the belief that moral sacrifice releases moral energy that can be harnessed into serving the common good. The concept of Graha (or truth) forms a framework for political action based on the search for righteousness. It shies away from politics that is based on manipulation and a balance of power, the type of politics that is put forward by realist schools of politics. Gandhi's belief in non- violence is not passive or docile but based on active resistance. However it is resistance based on a desire not to humiliate the enemy- perhaps even to win him over and to release creative energies rather than destructive ones. It is the power of love as the catalyst of transformation over the power of hate. Embedded in his politics is a strong concern for social justice and the pursuit of politics through a certain asceticism and sacrifice that in turn taps the creative, positive energies in a society and martials them for transformation and development. Non-violence is therefore not only restraint on the use of force but also a calling that demands that we strengthen the positive, dynamic and creative energies in our society. A political struggle based on violence actually strengthens the forces of hate and

destruction thus making it even more difficult to build a humane future society that respects the human rights of everyone.

Gandhi has been called an early nationalist within the tradition outlined by Kumari Jayawardena in some of her work on feminism and nationalism who included a component of social reform in their nationalist struggles. He was part of the bilingual intelligentsia whose access to English gave them exposure to the latest ideas and philosophies but whose love for native traditions unleashed an era of creative writing, music, dance and theatre that was unparalleled. Gandhi's politics was an aspect of this creativity. Caste bound India was left behind while Gandhi welcomed the ideas of the Enlightenment that had resonance in some of the ancient texts of India. His practice of asceticism and civil disobedience which drew inspiration from the Bhaghavad Gita was a creative innovation where the modern political rally and the practice of modern political participation combined with traditional symbols and concerns. It is this creativity that we must celebrate. Even in Sri Lanka we once had this bilingual generation of politicians, intellectuals and artists who creatively pushed forward the boundaries of our own national experience. Instead today, we have parochial mindsets, each fighting for its own ethnic, religious or linguistic identity without a concern for the larger national, regional or international picture. Gandhi was profoundly Indian but also a global citizen. He celebrated universals, religious unities and international causes while living the life of a Hindu ascetic. Such men unfortunately no longer exist and no longer inspire us. We are now mired in our own limited identities, constructed narrowly, exclusive to the world and insensitive to the experience of others.

Before I became United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, my stand against violence was an intellectual one based on appealing ideas of great political thinkers. Having witnessed, interviewed and interacted with so

many victims of violence whether they be in Rwanda, Brazil, Afghanistan, East Timor, the United States, South Africa, Nepal, Haiti or Cuba, I now have the benefit of listening to direct testimonies and an emotional understanding of the experience of violence and the damage it entails. I have spoken with so many women who are survivors of violence. Let me tell you the story of Alice (a pseudonym). Alice was a Tutsi Rwandan from a middle class background who lived in Kigali. One day during the genocide, the interhamwe, a group of Hutu thugs, entered her home, killed her family members, gang raped her and then left her for dead. They ransacked the house of all its belongings. A Hutu neighbour found her and took her to a hospital and registered her under a Hutu name. One of the nurses recognized her as a Tutsi and she was thrown out of the hospital. Alice then wandered into the jungle where she had to chop off her own hand which had swollen with gangrene. She lived on berries and grass for a period of one month. She was nearly dead when the RUF rebels found her and brought her to safety. Today, Alice is the leader of one of the largest women's groups in Rwanda. She has organized genocide survivors and now puts pressure on governments and the international community to provide services to these victims. She is extremely articulate, full of energy, brimming with life and dreams. The story of violence is a story of terror and victim hood. It is also often a story of courage, resistance and the triumph of the human spirit. I have met countless women like Alice, some who have experienced terrible domestic violence, some who have been trafficked, refugees, IDPs, victims of honour crimes, rape and sexual abuse. Once you have met these women, one understands the real horror of violence, its destructive power and its futility. At the same time one is struck by the resilience of human beings and their supernatural strength to withstand pain and emerge strong and independent. These are extraordinary women. Though some lose

complete control, commit suicide or enter the world of mental illness, the majority fight to survive and remake their lives. They never forget the violence but they look forward to a new future. The destructive power of violence cannot be underestimated. Nothing has brought me closer to Gandhi than my experience as United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women.

Because of my work on violence against women and because of the Sri Lankan reality I inhabit, I have tried over the years to understand the phenomenon of violence, especially political violence. The literature on violence is varied and multifaceted. The first type of analysis comes from the grandmasters of sociology and political science. In the writings of Durkheim, Weber and Marx, violence is determined by social, political and economic structures. Violence for them can only be understood in the context of these structures. They placed great emphasis on analyzing the root causes of violence and rarely spent time analyzing violence as a phenomenon. Seeing violence as a pathology they tried to understand what structures and processes trigger violence in a given society. For these great thinkers violence is caused by social, political and economic systems and can only be understood as manifestations of these systems. As writing on violence has become more varied, some of the more recent writers such as Pradeep Jeganathan have warned us that we should not forget this legacy. Unless we understand violence within its political context, unless we emphasise the causes of violence and the systems that produce it we will soon become lost in our political bearings.

Another prominent approach to violence coming out of psychoanalysis and third world radicalism, is the school of thought that sees violence as an act of empowerment, expiation or a rite of passage. The radical African thinker Frantz Fanon saw violence as absolutely necessary in the fight against imperialism. He argued that violence was an act of expiation, a

measure to gain self- respect, a way of affirming the identity of the self in the face of the psychological oppression of colonialism. Fanon has been an inspiration to movements that saw armed struggle as the response to oppression. Implicit in this philosophy is a warrior code with its images of heroic death as a sacrifice that vindicates the self. Violence as a character building measure is also found in many of our ancient chronicles. It is not only men that see the experience of violence as character building. A woman minister in Sierra Leone in defending female genital mutilation argued forcefully that the experience of extreme violence and the ability to bear that pain is what makes a girl into a woman. For her, violence was a rite of passage; the experience of violence is what makes children into adults.

I would like to argue that this celebratory approach to violence, drawn from the classical warrior model, rests on a certain perception of masculinity that may have served us well in the era of dynastic, warring societies but is truly destructive in modern democratic systems. I would argue that this model of masculinity taken to its extreme as in Nazi Germany is the harbinger of a totalitarian society which is kept together by the threat of violence. One of the essays that had a lasting impression on me was Ashis Nandy's article comparing Mahatma Gandhi with Nathiruman Godse, his assassin. For Nandy, Gandhi's assassination was not about a pathological act on the part of a madman but a struggle for what may be termed "the idea of India". Gandhi with his emphasis on non-violence and tolerance was seen as effeminate and shameful in the eyes of Godse who imagined India as an imperial power asserting power and virility nationally and in the world. The code of a warrior with its emphasis on honour, violence and retribution was Godse's code and he wanted it to triumph over Gandhi's soft "effeminate" version of India. If Godse had truly won and had his way, would India be the plural, vibrant democracy that it is today or would we have had a more

authoritarian neighbour relying on violent repression to give it cohesion in every day life? The alternative, heterodox model of masculinity that triumphed with Gandhi, was that of the Indian ascetic, gentle, virtuous, simple and righteous where violence has no place. And yet not everyone sees this model as a strength. There are those who feel that men, masculinity, violence and honour are interlinked and that self respect comes from the barrel of a gun. I firmly believe that this virulent model of masculinity, if it becomes the dominant model is truly harmful in democratic, pluralistic societies. Unfortunately after September 11th this model of masculinity has developed a new global lease of life, and the strident, aggressive message from Washington will have repercussions in all our societies.

A third school of writing on violence comes from South Asia itself and is a product of the last twenty years. Great South Asian anthropologists such as Veena Das, Valentine Daniel, Gananath Obeyesekere, S.J. Tambiah et al have analysed violence as a phenomenon in itself with its own logic and its own reality. The terrible ethnic riots of the 80s in India and Sri Lanka spurred on this type of writing. Focusing on the narratives of survivors, these great scholars have attempted to understand the nature of violence. The first thing they write about and which I have experienced when taking down narratives of violence as UN Special Rapporteur is the silence. Violence is one of those experiences which in the words of Valentine Daniel display the "sheer worthlessness of all communication". If you reach victims immediately after violence has occurred, they are incapable of speech. The experience is so intense that words fail. No matter how you write it up, they will never be satisfied because the pain can never fully be captured. Veena Das' moving narrative about Shanthi, a victim of the Delhi riots who did not make it, who took her life because she could not bear the memories, is a testament to the power and pain of this silence. As time passes

victims construct their stories but it always falls short of the actual experience.

The second aspect of violence that anthropologists comment upon is that it breaks all boundaries. Pradeep Jeganathan doing research among perpetrators of violence during the 1983 riots shows how these perpetrators used the context of the riot to break the boundaries between communities, between rich and poor classes and between the public and the private. The ability of violence to pierce through boundaries, especially if these boundaries are oppressive is seen in a positive light by some radical writers. But in truth, as Daniel writes, violence is the counterpoint to culture. While culture is about the creative constructions of a society, violence is about its destructive potential. While culture is about beauty, violence is about pain. The more a society relies on violence, the less the freedom for its creative energies. The more it tolerates the infliction of pain, the less room there is for a culture of beauty.

The great South Asian anthropologists also describe in detail how violence is also about excess. The descriptions of the perpetrators contained in these writings show the men or boys as being in a state of hysteria, or in a state of trance in an excess of passion. This excess then has been captured in newsreels from all over the world. Perpetrators interviewed after they have committed the violence explain themselves as either being intoxicated, or having used drugs, or having lost their senses for the moment. For those in violent political movements there is a psychological cost when this excess becomes accepted as a matter of course. Valentine Daniel quotes a trainer in one of the Tamil militant camps set up in India after the riots. The trainer said "You can tell a new recruit from his eyes. Once he kills his eyes change. There is an innocence that is gone. They become focused, intense, like in a trance."

For women, any form of violence spells absolute disaster. Practically in every modern war, women's bodies become caught up in the struggles between ethnic groups and religious identities. Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon's important work on the partition riots of 1947 and the experience of women gives us a clear indication of how women's bodies are implicated. In these narratives, women were raped, killed and abducted by the other side but they were also killed by their own fathers and brothers because rape was an indignity that family honour could not contain. Bhasin's and Menon's recounting of what happened after Independence to abducted women and how they were transported across borders at will because the newly independent states claimed their bodies, ignoring the actual desires of the women, is a testament to the link between national identity, violence and women's bodies. Today in many parts of the world, including Sri Lanka, we are also faced with the armed woman combatant who has adopted the warrior code as her model. This raises new and interesting questions about gender identity or as Dharini Rajasingham Senanayake has stated "ambivalent agency" but does not take away from the fact that for most women war and violence often means sexual abuse, displacement, trafficking and life as a war widow or single mother on the fringes of society. There are supposedly over 80,000 war widows in Jaffna. In the South, after the JVP insurrection the number of single parent households also shot up. Sassanka Perera, Selvy Tiruchandran and Gameela Samarasinghe have written important accounts on how these women cope in trying and desperate circumstances.

There is a fourth and final approach to violence which is about a decade old and which returns us from the narratives of the survivor to the structures and systems of violence. Analysing wars in recent years, especially in Africa and Asia, this school of thought argues that though a war may have just roots, in the modern context it has a dynamic of its own unlinked to the

political causes. War has its own logic and creates an arms industry, new regimes of terror, international networks of crime, informal and illegal economies and new types of social interactions. In the Sri Lankan context, Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake has done and is continuing to do important research in this regard. These new structures are the product of war and armed struggle. They sustain the war and its intermediaries and have a logic independent of political goals and ideals. They begin to determine the course of politics and not vice versa. Studies in this field show for example how the rebel movement in Sierra Leone lost touch with its base because it began to be sustained by the international diamond industry. The need to sustain this lucrative international trade then began to guide the movement rather than the actual political needs of its people.

In the face of all this violence and the narratives of violence, the human rights tradition of scholarship has also brought forward the notion of accountability and an end to impunity.

Over the last fifty years international law has developed rapidly. There is now a firm belief at least that certain types of crimes cannot be tolerated when committed in internal or external wars or in times of peace. War crimes and crimes against humanity as adopted in the International Criminal Court with its roots in the Geneva Conventions have now been spelt out as an international framework for accountability in times of war. When I spoke to victims of violence, they would break their silence and tell their stories because they wanted the world to know their narrative and they wanted their perpetrators to be punished. Recent research in Geneva on the human brain seems to indicate that the desire for accountability and punishment are absolute human needs and is a basis for an individual's sense of justice. If this desire for justice is ignored or thwarted there is burning grievance or anger that will manifest itself in other forms. Then

my role as Special Rapporteur and the role of all human rights mechanisms is to write those narratives, tell those stories, so that crimes will be exposed and those who commit heinous crimes be punished. Justice is not only an end in itself but a means for preventing future violence, allowing a society to heal by coming to terms with the crimes of the past. In Sri Lanka too, one day there must be a reckoning, where we address past crimes committed by all sides, where we acknowledge the hurt we have caused each other and where we hold those who committed grave excesses accountable for their crimes. Unless we do that we will never heal as a nation.

The desire for accountability is also closely linked to the right and freedom to mourn the dead. In Sri Lanka we have war cemeteries both in the north and the south to remember combatants. These are sacred sites that are nurtured carefully with much emotion and grandeur. But like the Greek classic Antigone, the tales that are not told are the tales of widows and family members of the dead or the disappeared who demand the right to mourn, the right to see the body of the person who has died and to bury their loved one with sacred rites. The terrible legacy of disappearances in different parts of the country often brought these anxieties to the fore. Recently, a cultural troupe from the east performed the widow's lament, a powerful indictment of war violence and brutality from the perspective of the thousands who have had to mourn their loved ones who have suffered an untimely death. The sad thing about vicious wars is that while the death of someone close to you is seen as a heinous crime, the infliction of death on others is dismissed with scorn and righteousness. This failure of humanity is at the centre of war's experience especially in modern times where codes of chivalry no longer operate.

Now what does all this have to do with Gandhi and what are the implications for Sri Lanka. It is wonderful to be theoretical

but what are the insights we gain for our own national experience. In Sri Lanka violence has become endemic. All the approaches to violence I have cited above have relevance here. We have political, economic and social structures that are the root cause of violence with ethnic, class and regional grievances that keep driving our youth to take up arms in some form or another. We have the Fanon ideal as dominant especially in parts of the north and east where heroic death and the warrior code continue to motivate people to accept violence as an important part of their struggle. We have narratives of suffering from every community and every class: our Centre is doing some research into this and the stories are endless. I believe that very few individuals or families are really untouched by the violence we have suffered over the last thirty years. We have the dirty war syndrome where international networks of people, arms, crimes and terror play a part in our politics. Our society has become so militarized that violence is often the first option in dealing with any dispute whether in the family, the community or the state. Crime rates are skyrocketing, impunity is on the rise, as are political killings and normal crimes. Despite the ceasefire there is an unease. Pradeep Jeganathan in an interesting article argues that for Sri Lankan Tamils, the anticipation of violence has become part of their identity. First there was anticipation of violence by Sinhala mobs or the Sri Lankan army so that one always kept a bag packed in case one had to go to a refugee camp, now the violence is by the Tamil groups themselves.

In this context, I at least have a strong nostalgia for the Mahatma. In preparing for this lecture I poured over his speeches and his writings and tears came to my eyes. Once you live in a violent society the apostle of non-violence becomes even more precious. And in reading his work as a Sri Lankan Tamil I am now even more convinced that we lost our way when we made armed struggle the dominant means of fighting discrimination

and oppression. In Tamil circles it is often said in whispers, "the LTTE and the armed struggle have brought us self respect, we can walk on the streets without fear of Sinhala mobs, if it was not for armed struggle the Sinhalese would not have given us anything" I must disagree. I firmly believe that if we had stuck to non-violence, if we had imagined new and more innovative forms of non-violent protest and participatory politics we would be better off today as an ethnic group, as a country and as citizens of the world. In this era of sole spokespeople I must clarify my positions.., I must first say that no-one speaks for me I speak only for myself. I have no political ambitions and I do not represent the aspirations of any people though my gut instinct is that people have diverse aspirations and managing that diversity with humanity and foresight is a great challenge for any future political leadership. My views are my own and they are genuine and close to my heart.

Let me state my argument as controversial as it is. As someone who has spent a great deal of my life fighting for certain causes, there is no doubt in mind that Sri Lankan Tamils have suffered a history of discrimination since independence. Not only was their language relegated to second class status, or their places in universities standardized or their demographies changed by state aided colonization, the Sri Lankan state could not even guarantee their basic physical security as ethnic riots became commonplace especially in the 1980s. However the repression we suffered cannot even remotely be compared to the life of black people under apartheid in South Africa. The ANC resorted to armed struggle but in the end Nelson Mandela and the Black African leadership were imaginative enough to seize the opportunity of negotiations with generosity and vision, gaining them not only freedom but international moral authority as a humane and civilized society

Though we must blame the present crisis in Sri Lanka partly on the inability of the Sinhala polity to effectively share power and respect the autonomy and integrity of its Tamil population, we must also recognize that the Tamil political leadership also failed to imagine a non - violent politics that was relevant and effective in Sri Lanka. For a great part of its non-violent struggle the Tamil political leadership worked among the populations of the north and the east and then tried to broker power with Sinhalese political elites. At no time did they endeavour to reach out to the Sinhalese people to make them partners in their effort to gain recognition and freedom. Gandhi's strength was to make everyone a part of his struggle to be expansive, to be inclusive to win over the other including the enemy. Instead, the non-violent politics of the Tamil leadership was primarily aimed at civil disobedience in the north but engaging in realpolitik with Sinhalese leaders trying to broker one broken deal after another. We did not have the imagination to bring Gandhi's ideas to fruition in the realistic context of Sri Lanka.

The intransigence of successive Sri Lankan governments and the failure of the Tamil political imagination- a failure for which we are all responsible, have cost us dearly. July 1983 and the subsequent armed struggle has led to over 700,000 Tamils leaving the country leading to the speculation that the population of the northern province has actually halved. It is often stated that nearly 100,000 people have died over the course of the conflict. Jaffna which once boasted the second highest physical quality of life after Colombo now has one of the worst quality of life indices in the country. The medical realities in northern and eastern provinces has been described in international NGO reports as being a medieval reality with the outbreak of once eradicated disaseas and without basic infrastructure and amenities. The enormous social suffering costs to individual Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims cannot be quantified but comes out in

the tales and narratives of survivors. The suffering caused by this war is immense and widespread-practically no one living in the north and east has been spared. Bomb explosions in the south have also brought untold misery to countless people who have their own tales and narratives. In some uncanny sense there is a similarity to all their tales though the perpetrators may differ. So much suffering and it will take years to record what has actually happened. Our society has been militarized and the social fabric broken in a nation where young men and even children have easy access to arms. Between roving militants, army deserters, child soldiers and a culture of violence the quality of life will never be the same. The enormous psychological damage done to our people has been borne out by a trauma needs assessment which states that counseling and psychiatric care is one of the urgent needs of the society where torture victims, wives of soldiers, war widows and ex combatants continue to live one nightmare after another. The work of Daya Somasunderam, THE SCARRED MINDS is ample testament to the terrible toll that war takes on the human psyche. As a result of the armed struggle we have two militarized, exclusive and virulent monoethnic nationalisms confronting each other. A struggle based on civil obedience based on an inclusive politics, on the other hand, would have necessarily shown the way for a democratic, pluralistic polity where everyone would have lived in freedom respecting the rights of others. As Sai Baba told a Sri Lankan Tamil politician, after this war Jaffna will be a desert with three candles.

Mahatma Gandhi once said "an eye for an eye will make the whole world blind". When I hear many of my Tamil brethren justifying every act of violence, I realize, yes we are all blind now. If peace comes now how many of our people will be in the north and east to usher it and how many will have the economic, social and psychological wherewithal to fully enjoy it. When I made this case to a Tamil friend while writing this oration, he

said "but we have our self respect." It saddened me that Tamil self respect should rest on a bedrock of such violence, destruction and suffering. Yes the Mahatma was right, we are all blind now. However, let us not despair; the Mahatma would not have any of that. The ceasefire as uneasy as it is gives us new hopes- hope of healing, hope of reconciliation, hope of transformation, and a hope of fashioning a new politics- if only old fears, suspicions and paranoias could stop Tamils from killing each other. If only we realize that there are other ways to solve conflict besides killing. Nevertheless there is some cause for optimism and even if there isn't I have decided to be optimistic. I feel we can try and make it work. Because in all my visits to countries of armed conflict or situations of violence, there is always the counter story of courage, resilience and basic humanity. Now is the time to marshall those forces. Now is the time to bring forth our suppressed, humane energies. I will end with the story that Valentine Daniel recounts in his book on the 1983 riots to remind us of the basic humanity of our people:

> She was a typical Kandyan Sinhalese, with the sari worn the Kandyan way. She wore Kandyan jewelry (filigreed silver) and a blouse with puffed sleeves that only Kandyan Sinhalese women wear. She was seated on the window side. I sat on the bench against the wall, away from the door. She could have been the mother of any of those many Sinhala boys and girls I had taught for fifty years. I knew the riots had started in Kandy town. I knew that the thugs were coming and was praying that the train would start before they entered the station. But the steam engine gave only one blast and a short whistle, then the mob entered the station and had reached the platform. The guard could have given the signal; and the driver could have pulled out. I don't know what happened. Either they were frightened by the mob or they wanted to see the fun. I was hearing thugs shout in Sinhala, "Get the Tamils out! Kill them! Kill Them!. I didn';t look. I could hear passengers being pulled out and beaten. There

was lots of screaming but no other words from the victims . All the talking came from the rioters. Rioting cheering. Then I heard screaming in the very next compartment behind ours. As the thugs were climbing the steps to our compartment, this woman suddenly gets up and comes and sits besides me. I have my hands on my legs to stop them from shaking. She puts her hand on my left hand. She does not say a word. I do not say a word. The mob come and stick their heads through the window. Three young men get in. Look at us. Turn around and say, "No Tamils here go on to the next compartment". Few minutes late, the train pulled out of the station. Tamil passengers from the train were still being chased, beaten and stabbed. This woman did not let my hand go till we reached Gampola (thirty five minutes later) She didn't say a word. Not one word. I didn't say anything. I couldn't. Life passed through my head like a reel...At Gampola she gets off the train and leaves. She doesn't even look at me. I don't even know her name. I reached Nawalapitiya an hour later. Still alive Thanking God. I still hear the screams of those people. I start shivering in my sleep. Pushpa my wife here says "Wake Up! Wake UP! You are having a bad dream. Then I feel that woman's hand on my hand. I stop shaking.

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Printed by Kumaran Press Private Ltd., 201, Dam Street, Colombo - 12. Tel: 242 1388