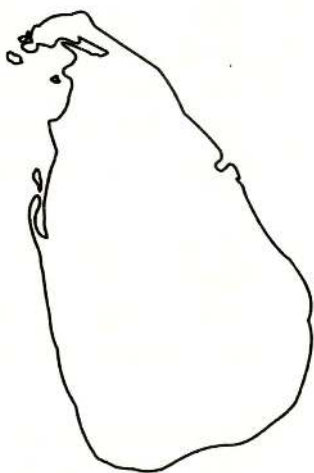


Public Writings on Sri Lanka



Charles Sarvan

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To Suseenthiran & Inparani
and, as always, to Liebetaut

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Preface

There is violence and injustice in our world that must be confronted. I know that a call to arms can stir the souls of men and women more than a call to lay them down.

(President Barack Obama's address, Prague, April 2009)

The mind is economical in that it forms habits; grooves of thought and then moves in them, saving us the trouble of thinking anew. What is more, these habits harden, and become fortifications. [Fortifications can become prisons, though we remain unaware of our mental imprisonment]

(From Rabindranath Tagore's, *Nationalism*, Macmillan & Co., 1917)

This collection consists of some of my writing of a public / political nature relating to Sri Lanka. Whether they provoke any thought, have any influence or not, there is the obligation to make the effort. The dictionary defines the term "public" as "that which concerns the people," while the meaning of the word "politics" has its etymological root in "citizen". However, the word "public" is employed here also in the sense that the content has already been made public through publication (public-ation).

The material is arranged according to the date of publication except for 'Letter to a Sinhalese friend', which serves as an introduction, and for the much longer extract from *Reign of Anomy* which concludes the anthology. I have taken the opportunity to make changes. This explains why, sometimes, there is reference to what was said or done much later than the date of the original publication.

It has been observed that it is wiser to speak as a historian after events, rather than as a prophet before them. Going further, one could say that it is wisest to write about distant history, rather than about present, or even recent, happenings and development. Events move quickly, change comes fast, making statements inappropriate. Yet, even in mistakes, even in the now irrelevant, there are lessons to be learnt. Secondly, there should be a record for posterity of what was once-current perspective and understanding.

A short autobiographical note can be found at the beginning of *Reign of Anomy*. As stated there, I am neither a historian nor a social scientist but someone who is concerned; one who, over the years, observing developments in Sri Lanka, has recalled to mind the title of Alan Paton's novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*. As stated in the Introduction to *Ethnicity and Social Change* (Social Scientists Association publication, Colombo, 1985), the savage nature of the ethnic conflict calls into question the civilization of which some Sri Lankans proudly claim to be heirs.

The war against the Tamil Tigers having been won, the concluding lines of 'Waiting for the Barbarians', by Constantine Cavafy (Greek poet; 1864-1933), come to mind. (For "barbarians" in the following, substitute "Tamil Tigers" or "terrorists".)

[...] there are no barbarians any longer.

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?

They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Victory on the battlefield is an end but also an opportunity, therefore, a beginning. Will the state, for purposes and ambitions of its own, cynically foster the bogey of the "barbarians" lurking, ever ready to return? Fear is a far more potent emotion than hope, and therefore, also very useful. Or will state and people act with justice and rationality, seek the good of all, and be mindful of long-term consequences?

Sarvan

Berlin, May 2009

Letter to a Sinhalese friend

(Published: *The Sunday Island*, 29 October 2006)

You emailed me on 26 August 2006 and, *inter alia*, wrote: “We [the Sinhalese] must accept things are they are; that the Tamils are not going back to India, the Muslims to Arabia and the Burghers to Europe.” “We must accept”: one accepts the unfortunate, the regrettable, that which, alas, cannot be altered. Ideally, there'd be 'ethnic cleansing' and a Sri Lanka made up purely (“purely” from the stem “pure”) of the Aryan race. Never mind we have been repeatedly told that “race” has no scientific foundation at all; never mind that the concept of “race” was a creation of the 19th century, helpful to Western imperialism, the slave trade, indentured labour etc; never mind that “Aryan” is a linguistic and not an “racial” reference. We believe what we like, and want, to believe. So, for example, we take the Vijaya myth for history but ignore one aspect of the story: Vijaya and all his followers married Tamil women. If myth is treated as fact, then it must be granted that 50% of the Sinhalese is Tamil. Or is time to re-write the myth, leaving out this uncomfortable reference?

Then there's the second part of the sentence: “the Tamils are not going back to India.” Excuse me,

but I thought the Sinhalese had also come from India? I imagine an autochthonous Veddha child wistfully asking, "Mummy, when will the Sinhalese go back to where they came from?"

Many people have 'foundation myths': for example, there's that famous one about twins being suckled by a wolf and the founding of the Roman Empire. These are entertaining stories and no more. It would be ludicrous if people took them as literal truth, as history. But, for the sake of discussion, let's take the Vijaya foundation-myth as fact. He is supposed to have landed in Ceylon somewhere in the 5th century BCE. (If some Tamils get angry with me, believing that the Tamils were first on the Island, I remind them: for the sake of the present discussion, and in order not to get distracted.) However, as I have repeatedly argued, after over 2000 years, does it matter that Group A landed on the Island on a Monday, and Group B on a Wednesday? It doesn't, and would not unless we make it matter. We human beings are the originators of value and significance. To bring in a wider perspective, the European settlement of America began only in the 15th century CE - *not* BCE!

Some of us settle in Western countries (disregarding geography, I include Australia and New Zealand) and expect, if not demand, equality,

justice and fairness, despite difference in skin colour, religion and language. But after over two thousand years, the Tamils are still considered foreigners: they are doomed to remain foreign forever. Isn't *Para Demalaya* the most common abuse hurled at a Tamil? And doesn't it mean "foreign Tamil"? Please correct me if I'm wrong.

The mind of the people has been poisoned, and they think and act, often not conscious of their own beliefs, values and attitudes. Socrates asked whether we can see ourselves, and answered his question by saying, not directly but only by reflection. The few individuals holding up mirrors of rationality and justice are ignored; worse, execrated and threatened, branded as "traitors", even murdered. Meanwhile, the majority hold up mirrors to each other which reflect and confirm images of falsity and division, distrust and hatred. And it's not only the rural folk and the working-class: the sickness pervades all sections, middle and upper class included. You yourself are a case in point. As one of his labours, Hercules cleaned out the Augean Stables. It was a physical act. But to clean the stables of long-held collective belief and deep emotion is far more difficult. But the effort has to be made, and hence this letter. Often, Tamils tell me, "The Sinhalese don't know our experience and predicament; don't know what it is to be a Tamil in

Sri Lanka today.” If so, the failure is partly that of the Tamils: a failure to communicate, to enter into discussion simply, sincerely, and above all, calmly. I hope this letter makes a contribution, however small.

Addendum

In a personal message to me (14 June 2009), Michael Roberts confirms that the primary meaning of *para* (see *Para Dhemala* above) is “foreign”, “alien”. *Para* can also mean low, mean and, by extension, without restraint or morals; promiscuous, as in *Para bhalla* (dog).

But the Tamils of Sri Lanka, like the Sinhalese, have lived on the Island for millennia. In the 19th century, under British imperialism, Tamils from India were brought over to work on the plantations. These Upcountry Tamils, though they have lived in the Island for well over a century, know no other country, and have greatly contributed to the nation's economic wealth by slaving on the plantations, are still persistently referred to as “Indian Tamils”. (See my article, 'Indian Plantation Experiences Overseas' in '*Kunapipi* : Journal of Post-Colonial Writing', Australia, Volume XXII, Number 2, 2000.) It is convenient for those given to “racism” and rejection to conflate the two (Tamil)

groups. For example, in Roma Tearne's novel, *Mosquito*, the Sinhalese servant, talking with his employer, says that when the British brought the Tamils here from India, they brought trouble: HarperPress, London, 2007, p. 19.

Sri Lanka: the media

A Sri Lanka peace-conference was held in München, Germany, at the Eine Welt Haus [One World House] from 28-30 March, 2003. The conference divided into several groups, and I was asked to chair the workshop on 'Publicity and the Media'. The following are extracts from the report I wrote as chairman, and presented to the conference. Journalists from Sri Lanka, representing the Sinhala, Tamil and English media, were present.

The media plays a major role in forming the opinions, beliefs and attitudes of the people. (The phrase "to form" is embedded in *information*.) Opinions, beliefs and attitude condition people's behaviour and reaction. Therefore, the media has a vital role to play in bringing about lasting peace in Sri Lanka. The following was borne in mind:

- (1) The Sinhalese form the majority.
- (2) The majority of this majority are Sinhala (rather than English) speaking.
- (3) Therefore, the most important dialogue is (a) with the Sinhalese and, (b) in Sinhala. Abraham Lincoln spoke of government of the people, for the people and by the people: we can talk for the people, and about the people but, most importantly,

we must talk with the people, and to do that, we must talk in their language.

Participants from Sri Lanka observed that there was a significant discrepancy between what English-language newspapers wrote, and what was carried in Sinhala papers - even when these publications emanated from the same organisation.

Newspapers were under the influence (if not complete control) of political parties and organisations, or were connected to individuals who were affiliated to such groups. Interested persons, it was said, "planted" individuals in newspapers who ensured that their opinions found expression. Often, those in the media find themselves compelled to follow company policy and dictates.

In summary, the media at present is insufficiently engaged or, worse, complicit in working actively against the peace process.

Suggestions made by the committee

The government should be proactive, and launch social campaigns to educate the people about the peace process. The media will then have events and "happenings" to report and comment on. Indeed, rather than wait for the government to act, rather than depending on the state, those in the media, with help from those within and outside the Island, should be more active.

While in the more rural areas, at most only the Sunday (Sinhala) newspapers were read, the electronic media, particularly the radio, enjoyed a wider, popular, reception. Efforts should, therefore, focus on radio and television.

Films promoting inter-ethnic harmony should be produced. (In the past, at least one such film, an award-winning work, was suppressed.)

The peace process should not be seen as separate but, on the contrary, as part of a general effort to create a culture where democratic values and basic human rights were recognised and respected.

Media personnel should be taught these values so that, in turn, their writing will uphold them. Monthly seminars should be held, where possible, with external participation. It was observed that there had been a rise in anti-foreign feeling in Germany immediately after the fall of the Berlin wall, but many journalists had then come together to form a group to combat this. In such ways, those who work for the media can play a role at once both courageous and constructive.

Little booklets discussing different issues and aspects, written in clear and “accessible” Sinhala, should be published, and distributed widely.

Both the print and electronic media should pay attention to children and the young (for example,

through 'comics'), that is, to the future generations, and seek to inculcate in them values such as equality, justice and toleration.

The alternate media of Sri Lanka should be helped. To speak the truth, the unpopular truth, calls for integrity, and for much courage and sacrifice: qualities exemplified by some journalists working in the Island. Diasporic Sri Lankans can and should assist. While freedom of speech was acknowledged as being an important right, it was recognised that the right to live in safety, without insult, harassment and discrimination; the right to equality and justice these were more important rights. Sri Lanka should set up a commission to consider passing laws that prohibited the publication of material that aroused group suspicion, hostility and hatred.

Finally, a note of hope and optimism: it was said that some progress had been made. For example, one could now discuss the peace process while, in the past, any person attempting to do so, was branded a *Kotiya* (Tiger).

Saturday, 29 March 2003

Addendum

In the few years that have passed since March 2003, journalists have been harassed and several murdered. The optimism expressed in the above appears, at present, to have been misplaced, the call to positive action now made dangerous and halted. Since change is constant, it is hoped that the political climate will also change, giving the media the freedom that is its life-blood: the well-being of the country depends on it.

Sri Lanka: drift to fascism?'

(Published: *The Island*, Colombo, 12 October 2005)

From this distance in time and space, it seems to me that Sri Lanka is in danger of drifting into some form of fascist dictatorship, and so I feel obliged to write: to remain silent is also to be indifferent and, worse, irresponsible.

Etymologically, "fascism" is derived from *fascis*, the bundle of rods with a projecting axe blade carried in ancient Roman times as a symbol of a magistrate's power. Around the time of the Second World War, there were people and parties proud to proclaim they were fascist. Today, largely as a result of the crimes against humanity then perpetrated, the term is pejorative. It has become a *Schimpfwort*, a term of abuse, used with little understanding, applied loosely to a person or persons thought to be ultra nationalistic, authoritarian and intolerant, the last an inevitable concomitant of the first two. I will endeavour to describe a few of the characteristics of fascism; point to factors which lead to its rise, and suggest that some of the last are present in the Island, mindful that those living in Sri Lanka are better situated to answer the question posed in the caption. In other words, I do not make assertions but merely pose a possibility.

All fascist states are dictatorships, but not all dictatorships fascist. Fascism is an extreme right-wing ideology that celebrates the nation, the state, the “race” above all other loyalties: “Everything in the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State” (Mussolini, 28 October 1925).

Fascism, preaching “the cult of the nation, contempt for rationalism and universalism, and hatred for democracy, liberalism and Marxism” constantly maintains an “atmosphere of feverish excitement”: *The New York Review of Books*, 12 May 2005, page 52. However, where “nation” is concerned fascism, rejecting multiethnicity and inclusiveness, claims that one group, and only those composing that group, represent the “true” nation: “racial”, linguistic or religious nationalism. Fascism harbours and propagates notions of group “purity” and exclusiveness.

It excludes those outside the privileged group even though they may have lived in the country for generations. An exclusive and excluding belief in one's own group leads to notions of superiority: every single member of the group, irrespective of character and conduct in private or public life, irrespective of qualification or contribution, is superior to any and all of the “other”. If this prejudice allows exceptions, it's on the argument

that "exceptions prove the rule". So all "white" people are better (in intelligence as in morality) than all people of colour; all men are superior to all women; all Sinhalese are superior to all Tamils, and so on.

Unfortunately, exceptions encountered by the prejudiced, rather than provoking thought or undermining their existing assumptions, serve only to confirm to them the general validity of their beliefs. It is not easy to dismantle group prejudice formed and hardened over the years. Besides, new paths of thought threaten an edifice of assumptions whose continued existence depends on its foundations not being scrutinised and tested.

In the service of the state and of the privileged group, fascism celebrates "masculinity", force, and the regenerative power of violence. Until they come to power, fascist groups rely on "volunteers" to incite the public, and to violently disrupt oppositional meetings. Those of the privileged group who advocate discussion and peaceful means are dismissed as foolish or as weak and timid; those who urge, "Treat others as you yourself would like to be treated," looked down upon with contempt. Such individuals are seen as effeminate or as aberrations; going further, as traitors who deserve to be intimidated, if not attacked, even eliminated.

Superficially, fascism is a popular or mass movement but, with its emphasis on the state, with its demand for military discipline and unquestioning obedience, real power rests not with the people but in an individual, a supreme leader embodying the will of the people and the state, and in the small group that surrounds him. Fascism, generally, has been a masculine movement, and though women of the privileged group were seen as cooperating and helping in the total effort, their role was largely in the domestic sphere, particularly in the bringing up of children who had the "correct" values and attitudes. In that sense, fascism, while claiming to be radical and forward-looking, is also traditional. Indeed, it claims to be inspired by, and to seek the re-establishment of, a past that was great and glorious, wholesome and pure: the ideology is secular and spiritual, martial and romantic, violent and idealistic, revolutionary and conservative.

History shows that often a corollary of righteousness is cruelty: the ready and unquestioning willingness to be cruel to those who are different or who differ. To hate and to be violent become badges of virtue and patriotism: the greater the hate, the greater the willingness to be intolerant and violent, *ipso facto*, the greater the patriotism: Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum* (I think. Therefore, I am)

becomes, "I hate. Therefore, I'm patriotic". ("But I hate more than you. Therefore, I am more patriotic," and so the competition goes.) Fascism may mobilise the masses in the struggle for power but is against socialism because true socialism sees the "nation" on the basis of the horizontal lines of class, rather than on the vertical lines of "race", religion, language. Socialism forms links, makes common cause, with workers from other groups, both within and outside the country. This, in turn, is seen as leading to, if not divided loyalties and sympathies, then to a dilution of total commitment to the ethnic group, its leader and his immediate supporters. Fascist leaders may make use of a religion, its priests or monks, and of its fervent adherents: those who hold other religious beliefs are wrong; and being wrong, they are inferior; being inferior, they are undeserving of equal rights and humane treatment. If fascism is a political religion, this particular (religious) expression of it may be termed spiritual fascism. However, once in power, those who represent religion must either fully join the state or be content with serving and supporting it. An exception is when (Christian) priests, (Moslem) mullahs or (Buddhist) monks come to power and declare themselves to be the representatives of the true state: sometimes, the greed for power

masquerades as religion, righteousness, and a religion-based (as opposed to a secular) morality. Fascism may achieve power through legitimate means, but its true and awful nature is revealed only once it's securely in power - in other words, when it's too late.

As for the factors that lead to the rise of fascism perhaps, the most important element is economic: economic distress and desperation; unemployment and inflation, leading to social unrest, sporadic acts of violence and lawlessness. Fascism thrives in an atmosphere of anger and frustration, of confusion and hopelessness, with democracy adrift and failing to deliver. The present sorry state of affairs is contrasted with a constructed past (that is, more imaginary than real) when the nation stood at a height of achievement, prosperity and greatness. The contrast between this past and the present is extreme and, therefore, also extremely mortifying. Into this state of affairs, onto this stage, steps a messiah, a saviour, the leader of a party who promises a simple and quick way to economic and social, cultural and moral, salvation. He offers not only prosperity but purity, a return to the old (noble and heroic) ways of life. The nation is partly reproached: it has forgotten its true or earlier self, the ancestors and the past; it has strayed from the old

ways and become decadent. But primarily (when not entirely), the responsibility for the present unhappy state of affairs is placed on the other group or groups. For example, British fascists attribute what they see as the decline of “great” Britain to the coming of people of colour, confusing coincidence with cause. The word “scapegoat” derives from the old Jewish tradition of symbolically placing all the sins of the community onto a goat, then chasing the unfortunate creature out into the wilderness, and so cleansing society. Fascism fashions its own scapegoat, and tries to exterminate or to drive it away into the political, economic and social wilderness. At the very least, fascism will attempt to bring that (scapegoat) group under total control, and subordination.

Though history may repeat itself, it does not do so identically and, where Sri Lanka is concerned, it would be futile and foolish to look for exact parallels. However, one notes that among many Sri Lankans, despite the work of scientists and scholars, there still persists the belief in the existence of “race”, more precisely, in a separate, homogeneous, Sinhalese “race”. This belief is partly fostered by treating myths, particularly foundation myths, as if they were history. Extreme parties describing

themselves as “national” are virulently “race” and religion (Buddhism) based. The ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese army and the Tamil Tigers remains unsettled, and though there is no full-scale conflict at present, there is no peace either: true peace is much more than the absence of war. Certain groups, both secular and religious (the distinction is increasingly and dangerously becoming blurred in Sri Lanka) foment “racial” hate and hysteria. The ethnic “other” is demonised, and made the scapegoat for present ills. Fear and anxiety are created in the people so that even an overwhelming majority comes to have that sense of fear and insecurity which members of a small minority feel. India is presented as a looming threat of huge proportions, even though there is active, both overt and covert, cooperation between the two governments.

As the Nazi leader, Hermann Goering, remarked to an interviewer during his trial, it is very easy to mobilise the people: just tell them they are in great [moral, religious, physical] danger; denounce those who deny this claim as being unpatriotic or cowardly, and say that such people will eventually expose the country to even greater danger. So easy, cynical and cruel seems to be the path to political power.

The economic situation in Sri Lanka is dire, with unemployment and rising prices. Ever since independence in 1948, successive governments have promised much and delivered very little. Corruption is endemic, and has infected those organs of state seen as the citizen's protection and last resort: the police and the judicial system. It is believed by many that the Lord Buddha chose Sri Lanka as the place where his teaching would be preserved in all its "purity". Unfortunately, this sense of a divinely chosen people and place creates in some Buddhists (by no means in all) a militant stridency and intolerance: the belief even seems to sanction, if not sanctify, hatred and violence.

The contradiction between such thoughts, words, actions on the one hand, and the teachings of the other-worldly, moderate and compassionate Buddha on the other is rationalised, proving yet again that often religion does not determine the nature of society: it is society that determines the nature and expression of religion - differently at different times. However, despite "racial" and religious fervour and fanaticism; despite (verbally) upholding ancient Sinhalese-Buddhist values, corruption and crime are rampant, and where prostitution and paedophilia are concerned, the Island is notorious, all of which, of course, point to

the primary importance of economic factors. Though certain right-wing parties in Sri Lanka may advocate people-centred economic policies, this *avatar* is more accurately described as “religio-racist socialism”: it is not socialism as understood internationally.

Add to the mixture, false pictures of the past - military strength, economic prosperity, social cohesion, decency and harmony - and the portents are sombre. Life for most is a grim, daily, struggle. The people are disillusioned and angry; frustrated and confused. The Romans distracted their people by staging bloody contests in the arena: some Sri Lankan governments and political parties do so with “racism” and Buddhism. (Recently, success in international cricket has brought diversion, and a much-needed measure of pride.) The contrast is between a great and virtuous past, and a decadent, squalid, present. “Let's move forward by going back to the past, and recovering those structures and values that brought us greatness” seems to be the feeling of many. There is a longing for decency and “discipline”, and for urgent (but immediate and simplistic) solutions. Some politicians seem to have small private armies, a group of men ready to take to the streets at short notice and be noisy and unruly, violent and dangerous.

If fascism comes to power in Sri Lanka, it will probably declare “total war” on the Tamils, making no distinction between the “Tigers” and Tamil civilians. Many may approve and applaud but, as history shows, the final price paid is terribly high, both by the victims, and by the fascist state and its people.

Nationalisation and government control of the economy will not be in the interest of the poor but in that of the state: all for the state, and nothing above it. Fascist rhetoric exhilarates and energises; it brings hope (material, spiritual and cultural), and it's not only the “poor, ignorant, masses” who succumb to its blandishments and “quick-fix” promises: the ideology, as powerful as it is irrational and pernicious, appeals to people from all strata and sections of the group. During my last visit to Sri Lanka, December 2004-January 2005, the daughter of a Sinhalese-Buddhist friend told me she would, next time round, vote for a particular (extreme right-wing) party. When I inquired why, she replied, “Because they really care for the poor; because they are moral, organised and disciplined”.

This sounds terribly familiar. The speaker is an intelligent, educated person; one who has studied and travelled abroad, and works as a highly skilled professional. Sri Lankans would do well to remember

that a fascist dictatorship finally turns on its own and fascist dreams become nightmares first for members of other groups and, finally, for those who subscribed to, were deluded and went along with that dream.

At present, certain factors impede a fascist victory; for example, there is no charismatic fascist leader, and the two main political parties still have a strong electoral base. But we must be cautious: as it has been said, those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat its mistakes. Within the bounds of chance and circumstance, individuals and people make their own destiny (Clifford Geertz, NYRB, 24 March 2005, p. 4).

I will be glad to have my fears proved foolish and false, but to assume that because something has never happened (in independent Sri Lanka), it will not come to pass, seems to me to be dangerous complacency.

Addendum

With reference to the cult of the leader, I quote from *The Lanka Academic* of 26 May 2009:

“As the President's motorcade passed slowly through Colombo Monday, 20-year-old university student Chaturi Waidyasekera pressed her head to the ground, then rose and chanted, 'Praise our king'.

Dozens of others did the same, beneath billboards that pictured Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa in the white robes of a Buddhist deity. Ms. Waidyasekera explained, calmly, that she believes the elected leader of Sri Lanka should remain in office for life because last week he ended a 26-year civil war with the violent defeat of the Tamil Tigers.

“For once in our history we have a leader who has made our island into one kingdom,” she said. “Why do we need elections any more? He is the king we need.” She was actually one of the more moderate voices along the route: For others, the President was nothing less than a living god.”

Ethnic expulsion

(Published: *The Island*, Colombo, 13 June 2007)

The expulsion of Tamils - children, women and men under threat and force; abruptly, without warning; causing bewilderment, uncertainty, hardship and fear has, quite rightly, been met with a storm of protest and, for that reason, has been halted for the time being: see below. According to *The Sunday Leader* of 10 June 2007, the plan was to drive Tamils from the entire Western province.

However, it is significant that much of the protest was and is couched in terms of the foolishness of the government's action: it was counter-productive, brought Sri Lanka an odious name in international circles; the government was wrongly advised; had shot itself in the foot; the action was a mistake, the tactic wrong in that it damaged the image of the state.

A few officials must be made public scapegoats: perhaps they can be sent abroad to some of our embassies? Etc. In short, the criticism is in terms of political miscalculation and damage, and not in those of justice, morality and human suffering. Few based their main protest on humane grounds; on principle and morality; on an understanding of, and sympathy for, if not empathy with, how the sudden

and forcible expulsion affected very simple people (they were not from the middle and upper classes) helplessly caught up in events beyond their control. That is one of the most significant and sad aspects of the whole sorry story.

During the Vietnam War, the Americans didn't know which Vietnamese were against them; which Vietnamese indifferent, and who was for them. Consequently, every Vietnamese was seen as a potential enemy, and treated accordingly: "Guilty, until and unless proven innocent", though innocence was often established too late, posthumously. Of course, the phrase "Vietnam War" is misleading, suggesting that the Vietnamese landed on America and attacked the United States. So too, one heard of the "Jewish problem" (for which Hitler devised his grim Final Solution) and today one hears of "the Tamil problem" in blessed Sri Lanka.

Thanks to stringent vigilance, the Tigers have not recently succeeded in carrying out a terrorist act in the Western province. But no doubt, sooner or later, they will be successful: the recent crude expulsion of Tamils will be an encouragement to them. And once the ambulance sirens have faded; once the blood has been cleaned and normality returns, the strategy of expulsion will again

temptingly present itself to a government that must show its electorate that “vigorous” action, harsh and collective, is being taken.

It is a cycle of action, reaction, re-action, re-reaction *ad nauseam*. The need is to step outside this violent and tragic cycle and ask deeper questions, such as “How did we reach the state we are now in?” One discusses (rather than argues) the question - not to apportion blame; not to indulge in non-productive recrimination which heightens emotions, generates much heat (anger) and no light (understanding), but in order to arrive at a deeper comprehension, one that takes in the history of “Ceylon” immediately before and after independence.

A letter from a Tamil living in exile reads in part: “We are distressed and infuriated by recent events in 'the Paradise Isle'. The sham that it was a conflict between the government (legitimate) and the LTTE (“terrorists”) has been stripped bare. The truth is that the majority of Sinhalese see themselves as different, separate and superior. This leaves the Tamils no option but to see themselves also as a separate people, a distinct nation.” There seems to be an ever - widening gap, an ever-increasing 'separation' - not constitutionally, but in thought and feeling.

Racism: extremists to moderates

(Published: *The Island*, 14 August 2007.)

Recently, I happened to meet here, in Berlin, a young man from Sri Lanka (a Sinhalese Buddhist) whom I will call “Mr Abey”. In conversation, he made a point that had not occurred to me. In my opinion, his observation is correct, of grave significance and, therefore, urgent. I summarise in the two paragraphs below his observation.

Since independence, Sinhala chauvinism has influenced thinking and found expression in the process of policy making. However, during the period from the 1950s to the 1980s, the state had two aspects, one that was moderate, and the other racist, but those who were racist were contained within “the ruling power block”.

For example, S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake ‘compromised’ while Rajaratne and Meththananda successfully opposed; J. R. Jayawardane ‘compromised’ and Cyril Mathew and Gamini Jayasuriya brought “oppositional pressure”. What is important to note is that these individuals did not represent any kind of mass-based organisation that was independent of either the UNP or the SLFP.

The situation now is different: "racism" has grown to such a degree that it has its own, independent, political organisation. The process reached its climax in the formation (April 2000) of the Sihala Urumaya (now known as the Jathika Hela Urumaya). Racist groups enter into alliances which affect voting-composition in Parliament; influence (if not dictate) state policy and action. In other words, racism is no longer confined to a few extreme individuals. The JVP is no different to the JHU: both compete for "ownership" of the same "racist" territory.

The case "Mr Abey" makes is that racism is no longer an aberration confined to a few individuals but has moved into mainstream politics and the centre stage. In that sense, racism has won normality and acceptance (if not pride of place). If this is so, the implications are as serious as they are tragic.

A political leader of the present time, when compared with, say, the JHU, may appear to be a moderate but that is only because the people are inured to racist politics. To realize how far down the racist slope the Island has slipped, one must imaginatively situate this politician within the political picture of the early post-independence years: in comparison with those times, he will be revealed as a "racist". To express it differently, what

would have been seen then as extreme and intolerant, passes today for moderation. One meaning of "normalisation" is when the abnormal comes to be accepted as normal; when something negative persists so long that it is no longer seen as being unfortunate, unjust or ugly: so it seems with "racism" in Sri Lanka today.

Racists and fascists are obsessed, single-minded and determined, vociferous and violent. If the rest of the public continues to be indifferent or indulgent, realization will come late, and a heavy price will have to be paid.

Kumari Jayawardena, 'Erasure of the Euro-Asian: Recovering Early Radicalism and Feminism in South Asia', Colombo, 2007.

(Review published in the *Sunday Island*, Colombo, 8th June 2008. Editor's caption: 'Racial myths debunked'.)

They had a dream

(From Martin Luther King's "I have a dream")

Kumari Jayawardena defines Euro-Asian as all those of European and Asian origin, through maternal or paternal ancestry. The work investigates questions such as how they were positioned historically; the contribution some of them made, and why they have been "erased" from national history. Jayawardena's study takes in former Western imperial territories but the main focus is on the Euro-Asians of Sri Lanka.

Despite assertions of racial purity and identity, even at the onset of European imperialism, Sri Lanka was a hybrid Island, the result of migration and invasion from India, with additions from the Arab, African and Malay world (p. 19). The coming of the Portuguese at the beginning of the sixteenth century (followed by the Dutch and the British) introduced another European element into the

mixture: a visually distinct and immediately recognisable strand. In the territories conquered and exploited, Western imperialism was a veritable “factory” that produced inferiority complexes and “contorted” *behaviour that still has not entirely disappeared* (quoted, p. 55; emphasis added). Within a colour-coded hierarchy, the Euro-Asians were sited below the (white) imperial rulers and above the conquered natives. (The term “native” was once a word of denigration but is now one of pride if not of heated contention.)

Jayawardena dispels the belief that Portuguese 'racism' was of a more benign and inclusive variety. The contempt in Portugal for Moslems and Jews was carried over to Asia and Africa - even as some Sinhalese later saw the minority Tamils and Moslems as “Jews” (in a derogative sense). The Buddhist-Sinhalese champion, Anagarika Dharmapala, wrote in 1902 that the glorious inheritance of Aryan ancestors “uncontaminated” by Jews has been preserved by the Aryan Sinhalese (pp. 249-250). In 1915, Buddhists rioted against Muslims: 'Muslim' in Sri Lanka often denotes as much a 'racial' as a religious group.

The Euro-Asians, placed above the native but rigidly kept away from (white) centres of power and status, subscribed to white “racial” beliefs, and

proceeded to make claims for themselves on that basis. The majority of Asians placed all Euro-Asians into one group, but they themselves were an *angst* ridden group, preoccupied with skin colour, anxious about preserving their precarious but precarious position. There was hierarchy within the hierarchy dictated by imperialism; divisions based on criteria such as the degree of colour, claims to near-immediate European ancestry, and occupation. (In the West Indies, descendants of white and black parents were distinguished and classified under 128 groups based on shades of skin colour: see p. 28.)

Myths of racial and religious purity were “particularly heightened in Europe after the imperial conquest of Asia and Africa from the 16th century onwards” (p. 245). With time, there grew the pseudo-science of, and belief in, ‘race’. In Germany, Ariosophy (from Aryan-sophi, knowledge) asserted racial purity and superiority (p. 246). Unfortunately for the Euro-Asians (and for other minority groups), such beliefs and attitudes were also imported into Asia. European racism was “internalized” by the colonized:

Obsession with racial ‘purity’ grew among South Asians. Nationalist ideologues of the 19th century were well versed in Orientalist writings from Europe that glorified and romanticized Asian civilizations

and religions. They were also exposed to Aryan race theories from Europe with their beliefs in racial superiority and racial purity. Some Indians and Sri Lankans [...] included themselves as part of the Aryan 'race' [and] absorbed, paradoxically, the arguments of European ideologues against non-white people. *Using the language of racial supremacy, local ultra-nationalists marginalized minority ethnic and religious groups* (p. 248; emphasis added).

The beliefs and diatribes of "racism" preoccupation with mythic origin and noble destiny; with 'purity' and superiority were inspired by European sources (ibid).

Privileged within the imperial structure but distanced; rejected by Asians; defined by indeterminacy, the lot of the Euro-Asian was not felicitous: see the title of Desai's novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. The existence of the Euro-Asian meant that Europeans (usually men) had had sex with Asians, while to Asian society, it indicated that "some of their women [...] had shamefully consorted with white men" (p. 240). To Europeans, the white element in Euro-Asians was good while the other was polluting; to Asians, it was the European part that was impure (p. 241). Hybridity not only blurred division but challenged the very concept of 'race' that is, belief in a permanent, unchanging, essence.

Anagarika Dharmapala, argued in 1892 that the Sinhalese belonged to a superior race and viewed Euro-Asians as an inferior breed (p. 240).

The overwhelming majority of Euro-Asians allied and collaborated with European imperialism, since such privilege and position as they enjoyed was granted and guaranteed by the West. As Carl Muller shows (see, Sarvan, "Carl Muller and the Burghers of Sri Lanka", *World Literature Today*, USA, 1997), political independence when it came was a matter of regret to them. But the focus of Jayawardena's work is on Euro-Asian radicalism; not on those who went along with the ideology and values of the time, but on those few who stood apart, thought independently and acted differently. If Western imperialism, both by its subscription to pseudo-scientific notions of "race" and its actions, encouraged "racism" in Sri Lanka, it also produced its own gravediggers (p. 98).

Jayawardena does not deal with such individuals as if they were inexplicable freaks, but situates them within the wider context of world history (political, economic, social), and changing ideology, attitude and conduct: her sweep is erudite and wide. It's a fact

that Europe did appalling damage in North and South America after the 'discovery' (sic) of those continents (as it also did in Africa, Asia and Australia) but history is contradictory and Jayawardena's work reflects this complexity.

Apart from science and technology, Europe also made a wonderful contribution to philosophy, thought and argument, creating ideals that animated and directed human effort. Imperialists hoped the Euro-Asians would be collaborators, a line of defence, and help the iron machine of imperialism to function smoothly, and the majority did carry out this function.

But, having access to the English language, education and to books, a few also encountered some of the best - progressive, principled - thought of the West. Their ethnic "Rootlessness" meant that they fashioned their own identity; were free to explore new thought. Rootlessness, *"far from being a source of weakness, was often a liberating factor and a source of strength"* (p. 85; emphasis added). Their awareness of the impact of prejudice and injustice was sharpened by their ethnic 'indeterminacy'; by their own experience of rejection as with some homosexuals, particularly in the more homophobic past. Jayawardena examines the life and contribution of a few individuals. Unlike other Euro-Asians, they did

not attempt to score the most runs for themselves and their cricket team (ethnic group). Instead, they challenged the rules, and the entire nature, of the imposed imperial game. Courageously confronting both foreign domination and “oppressive local structures”, they supported independence, feminism, pluralism, secularism, and the rights of workers and peasants (p. ii).

Regarding the female Euro-Asian, Jayawardena notes that in Asia, where the father was European and the mother native, their children were seen as Euro-Asian, but where the father was Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim, they were recognised as belonging to his community. (Born of a Sinhalese father and an English mother, the author is 'officially' Sinhalese: p. i.) Euro-Asian women of the latter group often wore the traditional sari and “passed” for Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim.

This (Jayawardena argues) points to the patriarchal nature of society. (Similarly, Sri Lankan Tamil women marrying Sinhalese men, pass as Sinhalese - they and their children. The experience and predicament of Sinhalese women marrying Tamil men, and bearing a Tamil name is another

story waiting to be narrated.) The word “passing” used by Jayawardena calls to mind apartheid South Africa and the American South where it sometimes happened that one member of the family, being able to “pass” for white, moved out and up. There are also other explanatory factors such as the human desire to be included, to feel that one belongs. The wearing of the sari by a Euro-Asian woman can also be seen as a sign of loyalty to, and identification with, her husband.

The racist believes that most, if not all, who belong to his or her 'race' are superior to most, if not all, of other 'races'. The (male) sexist holds a similar opinion where women are concerned and, in that sense, sexism is an aspect of racism. The reaction to the Euro-Asian female was on grounds both of ethnic indeterminacy and gender. But while ethnic otherness triggers insecurity and hostility, when it comes to sex, otherness can be an attraction. What is more, “the preferred skin colour for a European was to be tanned as a Euro-Asian, but not as dark as a 'native'; and to locals it was to be fair-skinned like a Euro-Asian, but not as fair as a European” (p. 10. See note at end.).

During the centuries of imperial rule, white women were generally inaccessible to natives but the Euro-Asian woman was closer, within reach and

realization. One could say the native fantasised that the Euro-Asian woman was “sexy” and of loose morals: see, Edward Said's *Orientalism*. The ironic title of a work by Jean Arasanayagam (Euro-Asian, born Solomons, married to a Tamil) is *A Nice Burgher Girl*, with “nice” suggesting pleasant, but also attractive if not 'available'. “In popular novels in Sri Lanka in the past, and in Sinhala films and television dramas of recent years, women of mixed ancestry were inevitably portrayed as fun-loving and promiscuous” (p. 207).

The Euro-Asian woman was “demonized by nationalists” (p. 186) - “nationalist” is often a euphemism for “racist”. Her very existence was proof of sin, and to the excited “nationalist”, perhaps more gravely a racial rather than a moral or religious sin. Needless to say, there is hypocrisy in the implication that all 'local' women are virtuous and 'pure'. (Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, regretting religious and social attitudes to sex, exclaimed: Alas, alas, that love is thought to be sin.) In *King Lear*, Edmond, the “bastard” son claims he is as good, if not better, than his legitimate brother:

why brand they us

With 'base', with 'baseness, bastardy - base, base -
Who in the lusty stealth of nature take
More composition and fierce quality

Than doth within a dull, stale, tired bed
Go the creating of a whole tribe of fops...
Now gods, stand up for bastards!

Relating the above to the Euro-Asian woman, she, while being thought attractive, was also feared and suspected: she was the product of feelings so strong that they broke socially and culturally instilled boundaries - and may have inherited these tendencies herself.

Jayawardena deals with stereotypes in order to single out individuals who confound easy generalisation and 'racial' assumption - and so provoke re-examination. Euro-Asian women were literate and more educated than not only Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim women but men as well (p. 218). Some Euro-Asian women took up social causes, particularly in education. Ruth Marshall, a Euro-Asian, opened a school in Colombo: Sri Lanka's first female doctor, Verona Wirasekera, was one of her pupils. (From 1892 onwards, the first ten women doctors in Sri Lanka were Euro-Asians.)

Another pupil, Constance Blacker, went on to start her own school. Ruth Marshall's sister, Priscilla, was "a legendary principal, heading the Princess of Wales College, Moratuwa, from 1909 to 1938" (p. 220). Euro-Asian teachers visited private

homes and taught “secluded girls” who were not permitted to attend school.

The attitude to European men in general was contradictory, mixing unrecognised, unacknowledged, admiration and overt rejection; that to European women, one of dislike and desire. However, those European women who worked for local causes were placed on a pedestal: German, Marie Musaeus Higgins started Musaeus College for Buddhist girls (1894) and was affectionately known as *sudu amma* (white mother). On 27 March 1927, the Buddhist girls' school, Ananda Balika, held a debate on mixed ethnic marriage, organised by Mrs Hilda Kularatne, the founder and principal of the school, as of other Buddhist schools in Sri Lanka, including Mahamaya in the hill-capital, Kandy. Mrs Kularatne was English. (The vote was against such marriages.)

Characteristic of the wide range (in terms of area and history, ideas and events) of this book, Jayawardena makes reference to the diaspora from the 'Third World' living in the 'first World' and giving “rise to Euro-Asians of various types” including Chutney Mary (p. 287), “a term used for Anglo-Indian women 'passing' for white” in London”. However, one wonders to what extent the succeeding generations can be so termed. Born in

Europe, are they not more “Asian-Europeans” than “Euro-Asians” - on the lines of, say, “African-American”, rather than “American-African”?

Finally, the question must arise as to the value of this book, dealing as it does with (a) a handful of individuals (b) from a very small minority (c) now erased from history. The answer is in the title which refers not to radicals but to radicalism. One of the epigraphs of this book is from an 1850 essay by Euro-Asian Charles Lorenz asserting that he lives not for the past but for the future. Jayawardena refers to the Euro-Asians identified by her as utopians. But unless one envisages a utopia, unless one dreams (in the figurative, Martin Luther King sense) there will be no effort, no striving. The individuals rescued here from erasure did not work for themselves nor for their own group - in fact, they rejected group identity - but for *all* Sri Lankans.

To adapt Dr King's words, what mattered was not the accidents of birth 'race', religion, colour or sex but character, conduct and contribution to human welfare and betterment. Their vision was not 'racial' and religious but social (if not socialist) and secular.

Sri Lanka's present is dominated, not by caring and inclusive visions of the future but by the falsified past (p. 282), dominated by 'race' and religion. In 1889, a Euro-Asian, Buultjens, became principal of the Pettah Buddhist Boys' School (now Ananda College): an unlikely event today. Jayawardena cites the oft-quoted lines from Kipling's ballad: "East is East and West is West / and never the twain shall meet". But that poem ends with the assertion that what matters is not group-origin but the individual: "there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth". Jayawardena effectively juxtaposes (p. 258) words from Anagarika Dharmapala ("Hybrids and bastards of Sinhalese... have become traitors to the country") and Edward Said ("all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous").

As Regi Siriwardena claimed (see p. 239), to be hybrid is to be truly Sri Lankan: one may say, "To be hybrid is the real state of humanity". In Tagore's novel, *Gora*, the eponymous central character, an orthodox Hindu Brahmin, suddenly finds that he is, in fact, the adopted child of Irish parents. In an instant, he is 'reduced' from being a Brahmin to an 'untouchable' and a non-Hindu. However, in this new freedom from inherited roles, he finds true and meaningful work - the welfare of the millions of poor children and so finds himself.

Kumari Jayawardena has brought much thought and research to the writing of this book. It is not recovery as a mere 'academic' exercise: these Euro-Asians have been erased because what they stood for - *a secular, inclusive and truly democratic society; an Island where ethnic labels don't count, and all are seen, and treated, as Sri Lankan, fellow human beings has been lost sight of in ethnic conflict, and all the tragedy and ugliness that conflict brings in its wake.*

Somewhere beneath the wreckage and ash caused by conflict lie the embers of the ideas and ideals that animated these individuals. They were sane and decent, caring and truly patriotic individuals. In the context of the unfortunate and shameful present, to recall them, their "dreams" and unselfish effort is to hold up an image of other possibilities. They, and Jayawardena's *Euro-Asian*, are all the more needed and important now.

"[They] have lived and [hopefully] have not lived in vain" (Lord Byron, quoted on 116)

Note: In films dealing with inter-colour relationships, the woman (it is often a woman) is so fair complexioned as to be almost, but not quite, white. Such films - Asian and Western - while pretending to challenge, really reinforce assumptions, prejudice, preference and prohibition.

“How did you become 'Sinhalese'?”

(Michael Roberts): some thoughts on identity.

(Published: *The Island*, Colombo, 31 July 2008)

The following was prompted by Michael Roberts' article (*Island*, 30 April 2008), and by Anne Abayasekara's response two months later (*Island*, 30 June) but it diverges in a more general direction.

Doris Lessing observed that there is something in human beings which makes us divide, categorise, exclude. I suppose this tendency can be traced back to early beginnings when our very survival as a species on the planet was precarious and, therefore, the identification of members of the same (animal) species of vital importance. Those who didn't belong to the pack stirred unease, were looked upon as a threat (or as a potential meal).

Given the multiplicity of the reality which surrounds us, taxonomy becomes inevitable. We not only divide fruit from vegetable, keep shirts separate from trousers but, among us, recognise difference based on various criteria, such as sex. News emerges from the maternity-room: “It's a girl!” Thereafter, the neuter “It” is replaced by the feminine “she” or “her”. Without categorisation, we wouldn't be able to cope with our vast and varied (natural, cultural,

biological) environment. The problem is not with classification but with the value we subsequently attach: “different” leads to “superior”. If some are “superior”, then the others are “inferior”, and those who are different (and inferior) can be treated differently. Once the equality of the other is not recognised, it follows that justice, decency, humanity do not apply to them. It's a sin and a crime to kill fellow human beings, but virtuous and laudable to slaughter the enemy.

Yet another reason for categorisation is officialdom. There are forms to be filled: age group, religion, sex, language and “race” or ethnic identity. So an answer to Roberts' question, “How did you become Sinhalese?” would be “by birth”. But this would be simplistic (rather than simple) because Roberts is not interested in superficial classification but in connotation, attitude and emotion, above all, in consequence.

The existence of the other creates our sense of identity but, sometimes, group-identity is devilled by mistrust and competition which breed resentment and anger. These, in turn, heighten hostility to such a degree that, for example, during a time of riot or war, a total stranger, someone who has done no known, personal, harm is attacked simply because s/he belonged to the other group: individual

character, conduct, contribution to society, no longer count. But a consciousness of difference need not necessarily lead to hostility. Indeed, one can argue that difference, and the variety it creates, are welcome. The questions to address are, “What has led to inter-group hostility?” and “How can these causes be addressed so that there's harmony?”

A small number of people living in an isolated community may be aware of others but are unlikely to harbour a defensive-aggressive sense of group-identity - unless something happens to “excite” such feelings. History is replete with examples of different groups who lived in amicable cooperation, integrated to form a whole but not assimilated, that is, keeping their values, customs and culture. In such a community, identity will tend to be more at the individual level.

However, the root of the word “identity” is *idem*, meaning “the same”, and since each individual is unique, one can argue that everyone has (to varying degrees) a consciousness of, if not a problem with, identity. We are trapped in our individuality; isolated (if not lonely) at the core of our being. Martin Heidegger wrote that only the Being that exists in such a way that its Being is an issue for it, raises the question of Being. Similarly, one could say that only those individuals for whom identity is a

problem, only those who are made conscious of their identity, reflect on identity: for example, those with a different skin-colour or sexual orientation (or both); of "mixed" parentage, a different value-system, those whose behaviour is seen as being eccentric (ex-centric), exiles, members of a minority group.

One aspect of identity is that of the individual (or of individuals forming a group) seeing herself or himself. Yet another is that of others who see this individual (and those with whom s/he is identified). A problem arises when these perceptions (that of the self of self, and that of others) do not coincide; indeed, drastically diverge. Dostoevsky wrote to his brother (22 December 1849) that life is in ourselves and not in the external. In Buddhist terms, one thinks of the meaning of "Asoka" (not one who is without, but one who has transcended, sorrow) and the lotus in the water (of problems and sorrow) but does not absorb it.

But can life be unaffected totally by externals? How many of us can attain such a level of wisdom and detachment? What happens when an individual's sense of his or her identity does not coincide with the perception others have of him or her? Each of us has many aspects and affiliations (identities), interests and pursuits but if someone, for

example, says, "He's Tamil", he chooses to prioritise an element which may not be primary to the person himself. In such a case, the comment says more about the person speaking (his ethnic consciousness, values and attitudes) than of the individual spoken about. In *Identity and Violence* (a work which I have cited in my *Sri Lanka: Reign of Anomy*), Amartya Sen argues that a singular identity is not only an illusion but, far worse, one that nurtures violence:

A "fostered sense of identity with one group of people can be made into a powerful weapon to brutalize another [...] many of the conflicts and barbarities in the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity".

This single, all-else-cancelling attitude is the stance (and the danger and destructiveness) of "nationalists". Etienne Balibar observes (*Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*), there's no racism without a theory, be it conscious or not. (He also observes that "racists" pass themselves off righteously as "nationalists".) As Heidegger wrote (*Being and Time*) by "others" one must not mean "everyone else but me [us]", but those among whom I am too: inclusion, not exclusion.

Identity is multiple, fluid, changing not single and fixed. What is crucial is not identity itself but the value we attach to it, the attitude we have, both

to our identity (at the individual and group level) and to that of others. Our second son (my wife is German) says he has no identity problem. He seems to view the world with irony, to celebrate his duality, and even to welcome the challenges it often brings.

Reviewing Kumari Jayawardena's *Euro-Asian* (see, *Sunday Island*, 8 June 2008), sent me to Rabindranath Tagore's eponymous *Gora* (1910). Gora who lived a strict (severe and uncharitable) Brahmin life, finds he was adopted as an infant; that, far from being Brahmin, he's not even Indian: his biological parents were Irish. This knowledge, rather than being traumatic, is liberating. Gora feels set free from inherited identity, attitudes and role. (One recalls Yeats words: "Myself must I remake".)

There's no longer any opposition in Gora between Hindu, Moslem and Christian. I have been carrying about with me gulfs of separation, he realizes and admits. Going to his (adopted) mother, he says: you "make no distinctions, and have no hatred... It is you who are India!" Gora resolves to dedicate his life to the welfare of the people - without any recognition of race, religion or caste.

Into the soul

The selves extend [...] their branches,

Into the moment of each living hour

Feeling for audience (Christopher Okigbo)

John Martyn, Notes On Jaffna, 1923.

Republished by Asian Educational Services,
NewDelhi & Chennai, 2003.

(Published: *Sunday Island*, Colombo, 1st March
2009)

Entries in “Jaffna Notes” begin with 1505 and the first visit of the Portuguese to the Island; the last is dated 1920. The work is dedicated to the Compiler's father, Henry Martyn, one of the first graduates of the “Batticotta Seminary”. The compilation, in the first instance, is for “my countrymen, the Jaffnese” to whom Jaffna will “ever be dear” (Preface). Unfortunately, there is much trivia: records of official appointments, deaths, honours conferred, examinations (academic / professional) successfully completed, relating to individuals most of whom are of no present importance or interest. Further, meant for then-present readers, some entries are bare and mystifying: “14 May 1904. Serious riots in Vannarponne in front of the Sivan Temple” (p. 75). “28 May 1915. Serious rioting and looting commence at Kandy and rapidly extend to Colombo and surrounding villages” (p. 104. One notes Colombo was then surrounded by villages). We are none the wiser as to who rioted and why. However,

despite trivia and the cryptic, the work is interesting, and not without relevance to the present.

Life in Jaffna, given soil and climate, was hard. Consequently, the book extols an unostentatious life; a life of frugality and public service. That things did not come easily helps to explain the comic stereotype of the "Jaffna man" (like the Scotsman) being frugal to the point of parsimony. Forty-seven schools in Jaffna are suddenly closed for want of funds (p. 10). Money is sent to sustain relations in Jaffna by those living in other parts of the Island or abroad (p. 276). Western powers wished to conquer Jaffna not because of any commercial advantage but for "the security it gave to their settlements in the richer districts of the South" (p. 142). The iron horse (the railway line) began to run between Colombo and Jaffna only in August 1905, helping to break the isolation of the "Jaffnese". There being no wealth to be extracted from Jaffna, the peninsular was neglected and disregarded. For example, it was rare for the wives of visiting high officials to care to accompany their husbands.

Though there is much chaff in "Jaffna Notes", one does pick up grains of interest. I will draw attention to some of these "grains", and then take up two aspects, namely, religion and imperialism, more precisely, the reaction to imperialism. In many ways,

religion and imperialism are connected, Christianity having been brought to the Island by three successive, Western, Christian, powers: the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British. Had Christianity been introduced to Asia, South America and Africa by powers technologically backward, militarily weak and economically poor, it would not have had the same immediate success. (However, despite centuries of rule by Western powers, the percentage of Christians in countries such as India and Sri Lanka is very small.)

In 1575, digging to lay the foundation for St John's Church, Mannar, gold coins with the effigy of the Roman emperor Claudius are discovered, confirming the Roman historian Pliny's claim of contact between the Roman empire and the Island (p. 137). On 4 June 1707, Thesawalame (the "Customs of the country") duly "declared correct by a body of 12 Moodaliars specially appointed for that purpose" (p. 147) is sanctioned by the Dutch government, and civil courts ordered to be guided by it. (For the benefit of non-Sri Lankan readers, a "Moodaliar" or "Mudaliyar" can roughly be described as a chief.) With some of the "grains" of interest (see "chaff" above), one wishes for more information. For example, we read that on the 15th of January 1799, the "importation of slaves into

Ceylon" was prohibited (p. 9), and wonder from where these slaves had been imported. How many, what work did they do, and what became of them? (I will be grateful for guidance on this.) Later on, one reads that during the Dutch period, "Freedom was conferred upon all children born of slaves who were Protestants, whilst those of Catholic parents were condemned to perpetual servitude" (p.144). Jaffna in 1830 is described as follows:

There were no main roads beyond Pettah. Main Street from the fort terminated near 3rd Cross Street. The rainy season terminated contact between settlements. "Pachchillapally, now the coconut garden of the North, was comparatively little known, except as the domain of the elephant and the black bear. Elephants roamed about Kaithadi [...] cheetahs committed sad havoc on cattle" and packs of jackals roamed (p. 235).

Even as late as July 1918, a leopard stayed into the peninsula, mauling "two persons at Uduthurai and five at Chiviatheru" (p. 115). In September 1880, a "Dharma Chattiram (a charity house for Hindu pilgrims, mendicants and others) [was] established in Colombo" (p. 41). Presumably, the pilgrims were on their way to holy sites and temples in India. In 1864 "the question of an *imperium in imperio* for Jaffna was first mooted [...] Mr. Henry

Francis Muttukisna [...] then fresh from a visit to Europe and smitten perhaps with an ardent love for the progressive institutions of the West, called a public meeting and harangued with all his eloquence, the burden of his song being that the time had come for Jaffna to set about to take upon herself the direction and Government of her own internal affairs” (p. 264. The choice of words such as “smitten” and “harangued” reveals the Compiler’s attitude, and relates to what will be noted about imperialism later on.)

Jaffna College was opened on 3 July 1872 “under the presidency of Rev. E. P. Hastings” (p. 270). February 1898 saw the publication of a short-hand system for the Tamil language (p. 65). The 23rd of April 1905 witnessed the arrival of the first motor car in Jaffna (p. 77). At a Durbar of Tamil Chiefs held at Queen’s House, Colombo (1 June 1909), “it was decided to revive the rank of Adigar to be conferred as a mark of pre-eminence among the Tamils” (p. 90). Following this, a Durbar of Tamil chiefs was held in Jaffna (17 August 1910) under the presidency of His Excellency the Governor. Wider cultural insight is provided in the reference to one Sangarapillai Mudaliyar. During the early days of British rule, this Mudaliyar was in charge of the “Oppum” department of Jaffna. (“Khai oppum” in

Tamil literally means "hand signature", that is, a signed document of permission or authorisation.) The Mudaliyar's office issued permits for the holding of ceremonies to mark

"marriages, births, deaths and other [social] occurrences, when the attendance of the Blacksmith, the Carpenter, the Dhoby [washerman] and the Barber were compulsory for the purpose of decorating the house with white cloth, spreading cloth on the ground for the newly-married couple to walk upon and for the temporary canopy, and for other services appropriate to their respective castes. An 'Oppum' was also required for riding in a 'Palanquin' [...] The 'oppums' were written in Tamil on slips of ola or palmirah leaf with a margin on the left on which were stamped the initials" of the authorising officer" (p. 232).

Moving to the aspect of religion, the Roman Catholicism of our Compiler seems to have been of a rather bigoted nature. Artefacts in churches are statues and religious images, while those in Hindu temples are "idols". No doubt, he would have reacted similarly to Buddhist carvings and figures. Unaware of his own bias; reflecting imperial attitudes, Martyn writes (p. 116) of someone that he was a convert from a heathen family: those of "our" religion are believers; those of others, "heathen".

Those who join "our" religion are converts; those who leave it for another are renegades. Discrimination against Roman Catholics arouses his indignation, but not that suffered by Hindus and Buddhists.

In 1544, six hundred converts to Roman Catholicism were executed by the King of Jaffnapattam, who also dealt in similar fashion with his own eldest son. The second son fled to (Portuguese, Roman Catholic) Goa. Thereupon, Saint Francis Xavier "immediately repaired to Cochin, and having obtained from the authorities there a fleet, with a sufficient number of troops to cooperate with him in destroying the tyrant", appeared off Mannar in April 1545, but failed in his enterprise" (Simon Casie Chitty, quoted on p. 136). The Compiler does not find it strange that a saint should resort to military invasion. In the name of religion, sometimes grossly irreligious acts are perpetrated - then and now.

Both Buddhism and Hinduism were neglected, if not badly treated, during almost half a millennium of Western rule. In 1711 (6 June), a law was enacted by the Dutch government "prohibiting Hindu ceremonies under severe penalties" (p. 6). However, it is discrimination against Roman Catholicism that is expatiated on. The penalty for harbouring a

Roman Catholic priest was death. Marriage officiated by such priests was void. Private or public gatherings of Roman Catholics were banned, but neither "corruption nor coercion" (p.144) led Sinhalese and Tamil Roman Catholics to abandon their religion.

There is no mention of the percentage, greater by far, of the Buddhists and Hindus who remained faithful to their "heathen" (sic) religion. Presumably, Dutch hostility to Roman Catholic priests was not only on theological grounds but also based on the fear that they would work secretly towards restoring Portuguese power. If so, it would once again indicate the link between religion and politics; between power in the name of a religion, and political power.

The relation between imperialism and religion is shown in that no "native could aspire to the rank of Modaliyar, or be permitted to farm land or hold office under government, unless he became a Protestant" (p. 144). Prohibition and disqualification were matched, on the other hand, by the temptation of rewards. The Dutch grant a Mudaliyar, appointed to "watch the Company's interests" and to deal with elephant traders "to the profit of the Honourable Company" (p. 152), twelve servants, permission to wear his turban, to be

conveyed in a palanquin, "and above all, to have carried in state over him an umbrella" (p. 152). Some who are unable to resist the seduction of power, wealth and status join the enemy, and become collaborators. Having become collaborators, their status is increased because (be they envied or held in concealed contempt) Tamils desperately needing help have no option but to come to them as supplicants. Not only do collaborators have power but they are the intermediaries, having access to the real source of power, the central government in Colombo. But there is more to collaboration than the selling of the "soul" for worldly gain; than sacrificing one's group for individual profit.

Whatever its fringe benefits, it is apodictic that, in its essence, imperialism meant military conquest, forced occupation, exploitation and humiliation. Why Western powers were able to defeat and control vast, highly populated, territory has several explanations, among them the following. Western scientific and technological progress meant military superiority. Those who have power are able to grant rewards, be it in money, land, position or privilege. There was division and distrust among "native" groups whose intra-rivalry, suspicion and hate were far greater than those directed at outside forces. The Uva Rebellion (1817-1818) was put down by the

British because of support from "Low country" Sinhalese. Solomon Dias Bandaranaike received extensive tracts of land from Governor Brownrigg as a "reward for eminent service during the Kandian (sic) Rebellion A. D. 1818." The so-called Indian Mutiny was crushed with the help of "loyal" Indian troops, "loyal" in their service to a foreign power.

Yet another factor, and the one relevant to the present work, is the success with which the belief was ingrained that the European powers were (a) superior in every respect material, moral, cultural - and (b) impossible to defeat. I quote from a review of mine: in 1870, in an administrative district of Bengal, twenty Europeans lived among a native population of about two and a half million. Indeed, a visitor to India wondered why the natives simply "do not cut all our heads off and say nothing more about it" (Emily Eden, *Up the Country*, 1866, 2nd edition, p. 116).

It was essential for the continuation of imperial rule that the conquered came to believe and accept that they were inherently inferior and incapable. From the conviction that the imperial powers were undefeatable, it was but a step for some to feel it was a pleasure and a privilege to serve, and in that way, be identified with them. (As suggested two paragraphs above, the motivation leading to

collaboration can be complex, including not only greed but also the mistaken and the delusional.) This last psychological reaction, both at the individual and sub-group level, has been portrayed in literary texts, analysed in academic studies and, rather than dwelling on it, I will merely draw attention to some of its manifestation in this compilation.

The British Empire meant the exploitation of natural resources (including, in various forms and capacities, human resource) and markets for finished products. Only British goods could be sold in imperial territory. Cocoa and rubber were shipped to England, and Ceylonese (the Island was then Ceylon) bought chocolates and tyres exported from England but made with Ceylonese cocoa and rubber. Yet, bizarre as it may now seem, "Empire day" was celebrated in conquered territories world-wide.

The purpose of this celebration was to encourage feelings of "devotion to the British Empire and Sovereign" (p. 100). As I have written elsewhere, while it is understandable that the British national anthem should express the wish that God would save the king and enable him to long "reign o'er us", it is odd when conquered people join. That is tantamount to singing, "May he continue to be victorious over us." The celebration of the coronation of His Most Gracious Majesty George V

is "the heartiest and the most enthusiastic" event ever known (p. 297). Imperialism was armed robbery - massive in scale, protracted in time - and yet the subject peoples gave, from what was left to them, lavish gifts to their robbers because the latter basked in power. Indeed, it was felt to be an honour if one's gift (more precisely, "offering", as to a god) was accepted - an honour, a bribe and an insurance. A list, too long to be quoted here, of presents sent to the Prince of Wales from Jaffna begins, "One snake bangle set with rubies and diamonds" (p. 243).

It is easy today to feel surprised and superior but, on closer examination, we see that, in some ways, the world changes and remains the same. The ethos of our times fits a pair of spectacles on us, lenses through which we see the world. We are unaware we are wearing glasses; that we see through them, and react accordingly. Few, very few, are able to detach themselves from their temporal, cultural, spectacles. What "Jaffna Notes" reveals is the *Weltanschauung* of many during imperial times. Rather than feeling distanced in history, safe and superior, this book should lead to the asking of the question: How will posterity view present beliefs and attitudes, present values and conduct? Will generations of Sri Lankans in the distant future be surprised, embarrassed and regretful (living in Germany, I am aware of this

country's sense of disbelief and shame when it looks back at past injustice and violence) or will the Island's posterity have reason to be quietly satisfied and proud?

The Jaffna I visited a few years ago was a very different place, and so, by way of contrast between a distant "then" and an all-too-real and tragic "now", I include below extracts from a letter I wrote to my sister, dated February 2004

"I deliberately went by car so as to see, experience and learn as much as I possibly could. All along the way are the signs of war and its destruction, most evident in Kilinochchi, Chavakachcheri and Jaffna itself. Swathes of the forest on both sides of the road have been destroyed to deprive LTTE soldiers of cover, and for timber for the soldiers of the "government" to build bunkers. I saw many trees with their tops blown off by artillery and tank shells; saw bombed out schools, houses, places of worship (Hindu and Christian) and other buildings which once formed part of the infrastructure. The ground is littered with landmines - laid, I understand, by both sides. (The

mines are not of the type that become inactive after a while, but will remain lethal for about forty years.) There are warning signs, and much work is being done by NGOs - slow, painstaking and dangerous work. I was shown fertile fields that one dare not venture to cultivate, trees with fruit one dare not attempt to pluck, for fear of unexploded mines.

All houses and buildings along the main road have been taken over by the army, the owners summarily turned out, without alternate accommodation and without compensation. One speaks of "government" soldiers but, given the fact that they are all Sinhalese, it is difficult for the people not to see them as an occupying Sinhalese army.

On the return journey, we stayed the night at Kilinochchi. We were told that there was an LTTE cemetery, a "Resting Place of the Heroes," not far away, and that at night it's lit up. We found the place, but it was in total darkness. From somewhere in the middle, an elderly man turned up with a torch, a thin man accompanied by a skinny dog. He explained that the power supply had broken down. We chatted briefly and, leaving, asked whether he didn't feel uneasy at being in the middle of a cemetery, far from town, all by himself and in total darkness. He laughed and answered, "How can I be

afraid when I'm surrounded by thousands and thousands of heroic young men and women!" The next morning, we visited the cemetery again. It seems that the rule about removing one's shoes has been relaxed because some of the visitors are handicapped, some have artificial limbs in other words, the wounded coming to visit the graves of their comrades who fell in battle.

It was strange to drive from such a geographic, and even more, an experiential, environment and reality into the lush green of Kandy and, the very next day, into Colombo, Colombo with its big shops, fashion boutiques, restaurants and cinemas: there are many, and very different, "normalities". You and I are sometimes startled by a cracker, say at New Year celebrations, and I wondered how innocent civilians "survive" aerial bombardment and heavy artillery barrages. How do they endure physical violence and brutality? How do they keep the soul; private and public ethics, intact and the mind whole and stable? In war, ordinary people endure the extraordinary.

Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict :

Understanding Group Violence in Multiethnic Societies. Palgrave Macmillan, UK & USA, 2008. (Published: *Sunday Island*, Colombo, 18 August 2008)

(Though the work does not specifically address Sri Lanka the data, thought and argument are relevant to the Island.)

Edited by Professor Frances Stewart, this work's ten contributors focus on three regions of the world: West Africa, Latin-America and Southeast Asia. In what follows, I sketch some of the salient points.

Kofi Annan (Foreword) observes that, due to various historical factors and trends, almost every country in the world today contains a multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups. While the majority of these states have succeeded in establishing conditions for peaceful and stable development, some have descended into group violence, resulting in the loss of lives and livelihoods, in shattered families, forced migration, and a breakdown in relations and trust (p. xv).

The question the Editor and researchers address is, given the same “starting-line”, why have some countries gone in the direction of conflict and so damaged themselves? While Bolivia has avoided violence, “terrible” events were witnessed in Peru

and Guatemala (p. 243). Cote d'Ivoire has suffered serious violent conflict in recent decades, but Ghana has succeeded in remaining peaceful, as has Malaysia (p. 285), proving that there is nothing inevitable about the violence that plagues certain countries.

Violence is not inescapable fate to be borne with resignation but the product of human attitudes, values and conduct all of which can be altered. One important cause of conflict is

"the existence of major Horizontal inequalities (HIs). Horizontal inequalities are inequalities in economic, social or political dimensions or cultural status between culturally defined groups (p. 3)".

The parameters of HIs identified are political and economic, social and cultural. These four are inter-connected: for example, political power leads to economic opportunity, and the two to social status. Where there is both political and economic inequality, conflict is likely, though not inevitable. Apart from the human cost - in terms of death and injury; grief and trauma - conflict is a major cause of poverty. An unfortunate irony is that inter-group conflict often occurs in poor countries, in a cruel cycle of poverty and conflict.

The cover-photograph shows a man standing before a destroyed building, staring into the distance. He is simply dressed but carries an

expensive machine-gun. Weapons are instruments of death: that money should have gone into, not destruction, but construction.

As ideological differences have diminished and “socialism no longer seems to be a serious alternative [...] *mobilization along group identity lines has become the single most important source of violent conflict*” (p. 7. Emphasis added). Group political and religious leaders can emphasise - even invent - ethnic division to secure their own position, achieve their political and economic goals. Ethnicity becomes an instrument serving these ends, and people are made to believe in the essential, fixed and permanent, nature of their group identity, losing sight of the fact that identity is (a) constructed, and (b) changes over time. Where Group A categorizes certain others as belonging to a separate group, what Group A thinks about the others can become more important than even what the others think about themselves. Of course, there must be some basis for differentiation, but what matters is whether these differences are minimised or emphasised, seen as essential or accidental, changeable or unalterable.

Citizenship, while signalling legal membership of a state, should also imply a certain standing. All citizens are deserving of equal respect, along with other members of the polity (p. 26). The democratic

inclusion principle demands that all citizens affected by the actions of the state to which they belong must have a share in political decision-making. However, through informal practices, the citizenship of members of another group can be "stunted". The latter must be distinguished from second-class citizens who "formally lack full standing in society. For example, women in many Middle Eastern countries (or countries under Sharia law) may not vote or pass on citizenship to their children" (p. 27).

What role does culture play in conflict? Samuel Huntington identified (*The Clash of Civilization*, 1993) cultural difference as the dominant source of conflict. However, different cultures have existed side by side over long periods of time in peaceful co-existence. When conflict then suddenly erupts it is because difference has been excited and used as sufficient grounds for violence by those with a vested "interest in violence: Hindu-Moslem violence in". India is not natural but produced (p. 41), manufactured: I would say the same of Sinhalese-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka. Cultural status inequalities sanctioned by the state create anxiety. For example, if in a multicultural society, a particular religion or language is privileged over the others. The state should not identify itself exclusively, or even largely, with one cultural group.

As for language, the UNDP Human Development Report of 2004 states that recognizing a language means more than its officially sanctioned use. It symbolizes respect for the people who speak it, and their full inclusion in society. Designating a single language as the national language generates unease among minority-language speakers, make them feel symbolically excluded and economically disadvantaged (p. 47).

The state, its structure and nature, policies and practices; in what it minimises, deflects or excites, plays a crucial role. Group mobilization takes a violent form when the state is not accommodating; when its structures are rigid and fixed rather than flexible and open to change (p. 20). Violence and separation are resorted to when the state, instead of addressing grievances, answers with force. Where one ethnic group has an overwhelming and permanent majority, other groups may “resort to gunfire because reliance on the ballot box is futile” (p. 25). The tyranny of the majority, that is, of numbers, leads to *Herrenvolk* (master race) democracy (p. 43).

In a context of multiethnic tension, the Westminster model of parliamentary government (“first-past-the-post, winner-takes-all”: p. 20) is not the answer. Rather, peace and development are to

be sought and found in inclusive, power-sharing, government.

Horizontal Inequalities is an important publication because it tries to understand the causes of conflict, so that conflict may be hindered or, once begun, knowledgeably addressed and effectively ended. The book will be helpful to thoughtful individuals and groups in conflict-plagued multiethnic-societies, and to those outside who are actively concerned about the plight of people in such countries made ugly and unfortunate by violence.

Neville Jayaweera's 'Sri Lankan Obama':

a response.

(Published: *The Sunday Island*, Colombo, 15 February 2009)

I congratulate the *Sunday Island* on having published (1 February 2009) the above article. Jayaweera writes that if, as many Sinhalese do, myth is treated as history, then genetically, the Sinhalese are as much *Dhamila* (Tamil) as they are Sinhalese because Prince Vjaya and his seven hundred comrades took Pandyan wives. In turn, it means that “through our maternal line, 50% of the Sinhala DNA is *Dhamila* and our genetic pool is therefore equally *Dhamila* as Sinhala”.

Such statements would not have been pleasing to bigoted ears. Mr Jayaweera says Sri Lanka badly lacks an Obama; that it needs statesmen who will act with vision and justice, rather than short-term, populist, politicians. Having observed that the two concepts dominating Obama's 18-minute Inaugural Address were “nation” (repeated 12 times) and “new” (11 times), Mr Jayaweera points out that Sri Lanka has never been truly a nation: the creation of a nation is a desideratum to be worked towards.

I would say that Sri Lankans must dream (verb) a new dream (noun) into existence. To dream, in this context, is not to be passively wishful but (a) to

present one's vision and then (b) actively work towards it. Jayaweera's article is a call to break free from the nightmare of prejudice, hatred and violence, and to make real the dream of a just, humane and rational society.

Martin Luther King had a "dream" of a time when individuals would not be judged and reacted to on the basis of group-identity but on the character, conduct and contribution of each person. Triumphalism is as tempting and easy as it is "vulgar" (Jayaweera). Victory must be followed by understanding and reconciliation; the wisdom of the mind and the greatness of the heart. He urges a return to what the Buddha preached, as distinct from the current politicised Buddhism which is a perversion of what the Soul of Great Compassion taught. Sri Lankans must be encouraged to celebrate difference and variety, rather than seeing these as either threat or contamination. (The Nazi obsession with "purity" caused destruction and tragedy of appalling proportion.)

Mr Jayaweera is among those Sinhalese who, each in her or his field (be it history, sociology, political science, journalism, literature, film, drama and so on) have argued, urged, pleaded for a just and ethical Sri Lanka. They realize that, if there is hell (suffering, pain) on earth, it is the product of our

human beliefs, attitudes and actions. In that sense, "hell is us". In my essay, *Reign of Anomy*, I wrote on the following lines about the late Adrian Wijemanne:

Of yet another kind of protest is when someone takes a stand against the actions of her or his own people, for example, those whites (branded as "traitors" to the race) who joined their fellow black Africans and fought against apartheid in South Africa. There were white people, taunted "Nigger lovers", who marched against colour discrimination in the United States. Some of the most powerful indictments I have read about Israel's actions in "the occupied territories" have been by Jews, some living outside, some within, Israel. Wijemanne's stand was for justice. If the Sinhalese were oppressed, he would have fought for them. What mattered to him was not ethnicity but ethics. Politics mattered because humanity mattered to him. Tamils who remember him must be inspired by his example to have his honesty and courage to confront mistakes and injustice, even when they emanate from fellow Tamils.

Mr Jayaweera wishes that Sri Lanka will soon get its own Obama. This reminded me of one of Brecht's plays where a character says, pity the country that has no heroes, and another replies, pity the country

that *needs* heroes. In other words, the pity, the regret, is that the country is in such a terrible condition that only heroes, truly exceptional individuals, can redeem it. Ordinary times don't need extraordinary people but when the mess is big, average leaders will not suffice. The longing for a Sri Lankan Obama, the wish for a *deus ex machina* solution, shows how dire is the Island's need.

The "hour" has long come; with time, things have got more and more urgent, but the "hour" has produced not hero-statesmen but "false prophets" and leaders who both incite, and in turn cater to, unjust attitudes, unworthy emotions and cruel actions.

Obama drew example and strength from Lincoln. In turn, Jayaweera's article partly leans on both Lincoln and Obama. Lincoln's 1863 Gettysburg address asserted that all human beings are equal and should be treated equally. Freedom for one group must not mean subordination for another. In the same year, the Emancipation Proclamation became law. (It freed only slaves in the Confederate states: those enslaved in non-Confederate states continued in slavery.)

Two years later, slavery was officially abolished in the United States; the 14th Amendment of 1868 promised equal protection under the law, regardless

of “race”; the 15th Amendment of 1870 prohibited infringement of rights regardless of race, colour or previous slave status, and 1875 saw the Civil Rights Act. Sadly, this wonderfully developing “dream” was abruptly ended (and subsequently reversed) by the infamous 'Bargain of 1877' when Republicans and Democrats reached an agreement at the cost of the African American and “a reign of southern terror on black life was unleashed”: Wilson. Please see endnote. On lines similar to the dismantling of such rights as had been gained by the African American, Section 29 of the Soulbury Constitution, under which Ceylon was granted independence in 1948, reads that no law shall “confer on persons of any community or religion any privilege or advantage which is not conferred on persons of other communities or religions”.

This all-important safeguard was deleted in the constitution of 1972. Discrimination may be unethical, unjust, unkind but it was no longer illegal. Sri Lanka still does not have laws prohibiting group insult or the exciting of ethnic enmity: contrast, for example, the Race Relations acts of the 1960s passed by the UK.

At this point, it is illuminating to turn to Dr. Brendon Gooneratne's Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam memorial oration (2009). Dr.

Gooneratne notes that in 1915 Arunachalam was elected the first President of the Ceylon social Services League, an association working to better the plight of the Island's poor. In December 1919, he became the first President of the Ceylon National Congress. Earlier that year, he (a Tamil, Hindu) had "delivered an address to a Sinhalese conference, under the patronage of F. R. Senanayake, for the purpose of organizing Peoples Associations throughout the Sinhalese districts of the Island for political, social and economic improvement.

This movement directly gave birth to the Lanka Maha Jana Sabha". Continuing, Dr Gooneratne notes that those whose thinking was not dominated by ethnic consciousness "had expected that at the elections which followed in 1921, Sir Ponnambalam Arunchalam, who had been the first President of the Ceylon National Congress, which owed its creation largely to his enthusiasm and energy, would be elected the Member for the Town of Colombo". The election result left Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam a surprised and disillusioned man. I am reminded of Joshua Nkomo.

Though hailed as "the father of Zimbabwean independence", Nkomo (Ndebele) lost the election to Robert Mugabe (Shona) because, when it came to it, the majority "tribe" saw, reacted and voted on

ethnic lines. (The Shona form about 76% of the population; the Ndebele, about 18%.)

In a system where power is gained on the basis of the majority vote, one cannot separate political leaders from the populace. It's they who vote a party leader into power and keep him or her there: hence the observation that, in a democracy, the people get the government they deserve. In the modern history of Sri Lanka, governments have been forced to break "pacts" entered into with Tamil leaders (for example, the Bandaranayake Chelvanayagam Pact) because of clamorous popular protest by some members of the majority ethnic group, while most others of the group either acquiesced or, if uncomfortable, were silent and inactive. Can Sri Lanka then hope for an Obama? Barack Obama, an African American, would not have been elected if a good percentage of white voters had not electorally supported him.

As is noted in *Reign of Anomy*, the leader of the governing party in India is Italian. Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards (triggering bloody riots) but the Prime Minister today is a Sikh. The President, Dr Abdul Kalam, is a Muslim. Can we imagine anything even remotely similar happening in Sri Lanka? (One may cite the example of assassinated Mr Lakshman Kadirgamar, a Tamil,

but he was “only” the Foreign Minister. Secondly, since he never stood the test of an election, one cannot make confident assertions.) Given the “climate” in Sri Lanka, whatever a person's intelligence and integrity; whatever the love and care; whatever the seriousness and commitment, no man or woman will be elected to the highest office unless he or she has the right credentials in terms of “race” and religion. These matter more than any other 'qualification'. The American electorate may be admired and applauded in Sri Lanka but at present there isn't that emotional and mental freedom which can enable moving from admiration to imitation.

Retuning then to Jayaweera, one wonders whether the “dream” he and some other Sri Lankans cherish (of justice, inclusion, plurality) will begin to be realized. Or are they calling against the wind? Yet there is no option other than to work through reason, and appeals to humanity's so-called “better nature”. Throwing up one's hands in despair is not an option. Rather, like Sisyphus in Camus' essay, one must find existential freedom in acting - even in the face of apparent futility and failure. I hope Mr Jayaweera's article will be widely read and pondered upon. Neville Jayaweera dreams (“dreams” in the positive, active, sense in which I use the term here)

for Sri Lanka what Rabindranath Tagore wished for India, namely, that it would become a country where the mind is without fear; where the world has not been broken up into fragments; where words come out from the depth of truth, and where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way (*Gitanjali*, XXXV).

Endnote:

Charles E. Wilson. *Race and Racism in Literature*, 2005. I would also draw your readers' attention to Douglas Blackmon's national bestseller, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War 11*, 2008.

Sri Lanka: some thoughts on language

(Published: *Sunday Island*, 3 May 2009)

The Sinhalese had little need to learn the Tamil language, but Tamils, if it had not been forced upon them, over time, would have learnt *Sinhala*, and the language problem would have been solved, gradually and painlessly

(Professor G C Mendis).

The 'language question' is again preoccupying some Sri Lankans: see, for example, Mr Arjuna Hulugalle, *The Island*, 17 April 2009. I say "again" because it was the major issue in the "Ceylon" of the 1950s, when I was a student of the University of Peradeniya. Had the language-issue been handled with reason and patience, rather than with emotion and impetuosity, the Island would have been spared animosity and resentment; conflict, destruction and tragedy, and been altogether a very different country today. So there is a sense of *déjà vue*, a feeling of humanity being doomed to repeat mistakes: I am reminded of Barbara Tuchman's sobering historical study, *The March of Folly*. But folly must not be permitted, fatalistically, to march on and on. I draw attention to three aspects of the subject, and hope it will not be entirely without use.

As one who has taught English not only in Europe but also in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, I am well aware that there can be resistance in some quarters to learning English. For example, in Sri Lanka it could take the form of "Why should we learn the language of our former imperial masters?" There might be the fear that the English language will be the Trojan horse used to smuggle in Western culture and values, to the damage and detriment of the traditional, the native. I think this suspicion and emotional resistance, where they still exist, can be overcome.

English is no longer the language of only the English. Numerically, far more non-English people use the language than the English. One now speaks of a 'first language' (rather than of 'mother tongue'), that is, the language in which one is best able to express oneself. So defined, there are many in Africa, Asia and elsewhere to whom English is their first language. It is unfortunate that the same word applies to a language and to a people: Indians do not speak a language known as 'Indian'; Pakistanis a language called Pakistani or the Swiss a language labelled Swiss.

The English language must be recognised for what it is today, the world's language, the medium of international communication. Ludwik Zamenhof

(1858-1917) invented Esperanto, an artificial language, with the hope that it would become an international medium of communication, cutting across geographic, national and linguistic boundaries. He hoped it would help create mutual understanding, and that understanding would lead to a greater measure of harmony. Esperanto did not achieve wide, let alone common, currency but in the English language we have a natural, living, "Esperanto": it must be seen, taught and used as such.

To move to the second aspect which I suggest for consideration, one way of preventing the march of folly, the repetition of the past, is to learn from the past. Perhaps the major contributing factor to Sri Lanka's much-troubled history since independence was the sense (strengthened over many decades and centuries of Western imperial rule) of neglect, disregard and insult felt by the majority, be it in economic, cultural (including religious) or social terms. Position and power belonged, in the first instance, to the British; secondly, to the Westernised "Ceylonese" who spoke, and were comfortable in, English. (To our shame, it must be remembered that inadequate or imperfect English caused superior amusement, but not a lack of competence in Sinhala or Tamil.)

It is argued that English functioned as the link-language at independence and prior to the Sinhala-Only Act and, therefore, should be re-instated and given the importance it then had. But at independence the vast majority of Sinhalese and Tamils were not competent in English: the language "linked" only the English-educated middle-class, and the Colombo elite of that time.

According to data provided by Mr K G Kulasena (formerly of the Education Research Institute), just two years before independence (1948), only 6.3% of the population was literate in English. I hope the situation is now very different, but the danger remains: giving greater prominence to English will, once again, privilege the middle class in urban centres, above all in the capital city. This is a possibility and potential danger that must be thought about and avoided by the investment of funds and resources, and the providing of incentives. If it is not done, resentment and resulting violence will repeat themselves.

Thirdly, there are some who, motivated by laudable feelings and aims such as generosity, justice and inclusion, argue that the Island strive toward tri-lingualism: Sinhala, Tamil and English. "The Tamil speaking areas could revert to having Buddhist priests in their schools to take the Sinhala

classes as was [once] the case. This will result in Buddhist priests learning Tamil and being able to preach in Tamil, and Tamils will be introduced to Buddhist precepts" (Arjuna Hulugalle). No doubt, tri-lingualism would greatly contribute to the ushering in of linguistic, social and political harmony. Sri Lanka would become a true "Paradise Isle", not merely in scenic terms; not only for the local wealthy and foreign tourists. Of course, I would welcome Sinhalese having some competence in the Tamil language but, as an erstwhile pedagogue (and at the risk of outraging, even incensing, some Tamils), I must acknowledge I have reservations. Learning a language means the investment of resources: teachers and their salary, textbooks and teaching-aids. Time is also a consideration since time devoted to one subject implies the limitation or total exclusion of another subject or subjects. Is it, educationally and otherwise, "economic" for roughly 80% of the population to expend resources, time and energy in learning the language of 20%? It may be countered that the motive here is not so much the learning of a language but the far more important political and social goals of inclusion, fair play, and the building of national harmony "harmony", as distinct from a "peace" imposed by military and numerical superiority. But experience shows that a language learnt and not used is soon lost.

A pupil in the South expends hours learning Tamil but, thereafter, never has occasion to use it. Is that not a waste of time? Shouldn't that time have been spent more usefully? Or is the thinking that language-competence is not lost but merely in abeyance, and can be quickly resuscitated, should the need arise? I taught for several years at the University of Zambia.

Zambia is a large, linguistically diverse, country with English as the official language. (Among other things, one had to be competent in English in order to stand for parliamentary election. I don't know if this law still applies.) So that no one ethnic / linguistic would be advantaged, all were equally "challenged". If a state employee were transferred to an area whose language she didn't know, she (or he) could nevertheless function because neutral English was the medium of administration. Still, I am not convinced that all Sinhalese pupils should learn Tamil. Perhaps, it can be decided on (a) where one worked and (b) the nature of the work to be done.

A woman or man is granted a scholarship to study, be trained or carry out research in a foreign country whose language is totally foreign to her or him. S/he attends an intensive course, usually lasting about six months, and at the end of it, is ready to commence. Similarly, a Sinhalese found to need

Tamil can be given time and opportunity to intensively learn the language. This language-competence could be made a condition for securing or retaining employment, and for receiving promotion. Similarly, Tamils can be offered incentives (say, a small increment in salary) to learn Sinhala. Of course, given the present "ethnic climate", whether it is even remotely realistic to expect Sinhalese to learn Tamil is another matter. Much preparatory work, sustained, intensive and persuasive in nature ("propaganda", but in a positive sense) will have to be undertaken.

I am confident there is no dearth of creative ideas and solutions in Sri Lanka. What is needed is the political will and determination. If decisions and actions are not guided by emotion but by reason; if answers are applied with seriousness and patience, then the language issue, rather than being a dangerous and divisive "problem" (as it has been) can transform itself into solution and salvation. To adapt the words of Robert Lowe, 1st Viscount Sherbrooke (1811-1892), every effort must be made to educate our masters, that is, the populace whose wishes and demands are catered for (if not pandered to) because of the fear of electoral consequence. "Esperanto" is derived from "one who hopes".

Mrs Anne Abayasekara (a Sinhalese), having read the above, pointed out the following:

Tamils living in the South have to contend daily with Sinhalese officials and clerks in government departments who can't communicate with them in Tamil.

At police stations, statements are written in Sinhala without the "benefit even of an English translation (which language some Tamils understand), and the Tamil citizen is required to sign the document without any understanding of what he might be putting his signature to."

Nearly all government directives (e.g. from the ministries of Education and Health) are in Sinhala only.

Sign-boards at the National Hospital, Immigration and Pensions departments are in Sinhala only.

She concluded, "If, as is boasted in newspaper articles, there are more Tamil people living in the South than in Jaffna, why isn't their language which is, on paper, equally an official language with Sinhala, given due consideration?"

Indian Embassy, Berlin: three short films.

Though these are Indian (and not Sri Lankan) films, their themes are of relevance to Sri Lanka: (a) inter-group violence, (b) division: emotional and experiential, if not territorial and (c), the inculcation and perpetuation of ethnic animosity.

The cultural division of the Indian Embassy, Berlin, frequently has events such as classical music, dance, lectures and exhibitions. They are open to the public and entrance is free. On 24 April 2009, three short films (all have won international recognition) were screened. The first was *Antargatha* by Dollar Mondal. A young soldier (in civilian clothes) makes his way to a village; searches for, and finds the mother of his dead friend and fellow soldier. It is a very brief visit, the main purpose of which is to deliver to the mother a sari her son had bought for her. (Later, in a not uncommon but still poignant scene, the mother is seen gently stroking the sari so closely associated with her son.)

The village consists of a few, dilapidated, houses. The villagers lead uneventful, subdued, lives; few words are spoken and, in between, there are long silences. There's no expectation or hope of change. It is Independence Day and, in a thought-provoking contrast, school children are shown singing proud

patriotic songs: emotion and assertion with little to substantiate or justify in the physical and temporal present. In the bus, on his return journey, the visitor wears his military uniform, preparatory to reporting for duty, and the possibility suggests itself that he too may meet with an early and violent end.

The second, *Narmeen* by Dipti Gogna, is a "Partition" film, that is, when India fragmented into West and East Pakistan in 1947, with appalling cruelty and immense loss of life. While the wealthy can live distanced, separate lives, others have various degrees of proximate living forced upon them. A young Moslem couple (he is a medical doctor) share "space" with a Sikh father and his little daughter - the girl's mother is absent. The young Moslem woman (still almost a girl herself) befriends the child. They play games and, perhaps heightened by loneliness, grow very fond of each other. But the father, incited and "excited" by the climate of ethnic hate, sternly forbids his daughter to have any contact with Moslems. The Moslem couple, not being able to believe and accept the changed emotional mood; not wanting to leave the little they have built up, misjudge the situation and fail to escape in time to Pakistan. The husband, despite danger, goes out to attend to a patient and, ominously, does not return. A mob bursts into the

house, and the wife hides herself. No doubt, she would have been soon discovered, but the Sikh father tells them that the Moslem couple had fled the previous day. The mob moves on in search of other victims to dismember. Perhaps moved by the Moslem woman's kindness to his daughter, common humanity had reasserted itself in the father, and overcome narrow ethnic division. The film is open-ended: the chances of that marooned (not to mention, beautiful) young woman making her way to Pakistan are slim.

Supriyo Sen's film *Wagah* is about the ritual that takes place at the frontier post along the border between India and Pakistan. (The film won an award at this year's Berlinale. To mark the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the theme of the Talent Short Film Competition for 2009 was 'My Wall'.) The ritual lowering of the Indian and Pakistani flags are marked by such martial exaggeration as to be comic, rather than impressive. While parading (acting?), the soldiers on both sides vie with one another to swing their arms and legs higher; shout their commands louder and longer, and glare more fiercely than the other. It becomes "Pop" nationalism (as Mr Sen said), almost a form of self-parody and self-caricature. Meanwhile, crowds of Indian and Pakistani civilians on either side of the

barrier, in holiday mood, wave their respective flags, dance, shout and act out their own version of the military ceremony. It's all a bit of Bollywood, heightened theatricality, a picnic, a circus, a mock gladiatorial performance. As at a cricket match, there's intense emotion but, at the end, it's only a game: to use that English expression, "a good time was had by all."

The film ends with three little boys acting out the ritual confrontation. Throughout time and the world over, children have played "war games". (Perhaps, children in Sri Lanka entertain themselves with "games" between the Sinhalese army and the Tamil Tigers?) But the subtext of the film asks, "Is it entirely and only exaggeration, a bit of theatre and fun? Is it only a game?" Games and 'make believe' are based on reality. What is more, such 'performances' heighten the otherness of the "other". Antagonism and hostility are kept alive. In this way, history is not only remembered but, most unfortunately, *perpetuated*. Beneath the ridiculous pomposity excellently filmed in *Wagah*, lies a sombre and sobering thought: adult attitudes and action are imitated by the three children; children grow into adults, and so the violent and tragic cycle is made to continue. At the reception which followed the screening, and in response to a query of

mine, the Indian Embassy representative who was in charge of the evening observed that, second to Indonesia, India has the largest number of Moslems.

Then what is the cause of this conflict? As with conflict elsewhere in the world one asks, "Who are those who keep it alive, and why? Why is the poisoned chalice passed from generation to generation?" If one may be permitted to quote from a musical, lines from "South Pacific", based on James Michener's book, *Tales of the South Pacific*, are apposite:

You've got to be taught to hate and fear
You've got to be taught from year to year
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.
You've got to be taught ...
To hate all the people your relatives hate
You've got to be carefully taught.

'Nation building': opposed concepts and aims

(Published: *Sunday Leader*, Colombo, 24 May 2009)

Several Sri Lankans, giving thought to the important and urgent challenge the Island faces of “nation building”, are making worthy and well-intentioned contributions. I am privileged and fortunate to know a few Sinhalese individuals who, by innate nature and nurtured principle, uphold justice and our common, human, equality. And there are many other Sinhalese who, though not known to me personally, cherish and live by these same values.

We associate voluntarily with like-minded people; with individuals who hold similar ideas and beliefs, values and goals. They are the “world” in which we have our being. However, living in this small world, we often mistake it for the much bigger “world” external to our circle; forget the wider reality outside. In other words, a small minority forgets the fact that it is made up, after all, by a few, and that the overwhelming majority has quite different beliefs, ideas and goals. That is when assumptions prove mistaken, leading to surprise, disappointment and hurt. Allow me an analogy. Living in Colombo in the 1950s; keeping the company of Tamil relations and Sinhalese friends

who all spoke English, one could be forgiven for assuming that (almost) “everybody” spoke English. The fact is that only a very small percentage of the population was literate in English: the impression held by the English-educated middle class was utterly at variance with the fact.

I often read the observation that Sri Lanka in its long history has never been a nation in the true sense of the word. Now, after war and its destruction and tragedy; with emotions (of various kinds) roused; with triumphalism on the one side, uncertainty and anxiety on the other; now with an increased ethnic chasm, Sri Lanka is even less a nation than before, and hence the urgency and importance of the task of “nation building”. But this begs the question: What do we mean by “nation”?

One concept of nation is that of different groups, while preserving their distinct ethnic identity, coming together, freely and in equality (“freely” and “in equality” emphasised), to form a whole. The variety that multiculturalism brings is seen as attractive and a positive. The goal is integration, not assimilation, since the latter implies the loss of a distinct cultural identity. The resulting nation represents unity in diversity; different shades and shapes coming together to form a rich, living, tapestry. As Chinua Achebe writes, “Let every

people bring their gifts to the great festival of the world's cultural harvest, and mankind will be all the richer for the variety and distinctiveness of the offerings" (*Morning Yet On Creation Day*. Please also see Endnote.).

But there is another, contrary, concept that rejects the ideal of a multiethnic, multicultural, nation founded on equality in difference. It is harboured not only by many of the rural masses and urban workers, but also by the middle and upper classes; by professionals and academics. Attempts to realize this particular "dream" led, among other things, for most Burghers and many Tamils to flee the Island in which they were born, for which they care and (I venture to say), in a deep recess, still miss. The idea and ideal of nation believed in and savoured by this majority harks back to myth; to the belief that the Buddha wanted the Island to be the preserve of Buddhism in its essential purity. Somewhat similarly, some Calvinists believe that from all the millions on the planet they, and only they, have been selected for salvation, albeit quite unworthily and inexplicably.

Allied to the notion of being divinely selected, chosen, is that of "purity". An individual may consciously strive for as pure, as good, a life as he can attain and daily maintain, both in the private and

public spheres. This is quite different from attempting to make all who inhabit a certain region or country adherents of a particular religion or to be under the domination and control of those of that faith. What results in the latter is only a label of homogeneity or, if you will, of purity: "Our country is Moslem" or "Ours is a Hindustan" or "This is a Buddhist island" or "We are a Christian nation". Such a slogan has nothing to do with the moral and spiritual essence of religion. Going further, when the "beautiful", *spiritual*, notion of purity is picked up, transferred and expressed in group or ethnic terms, the consequences are "ugly" (destructive and tragic) as history repeatedly shows.

God and religion become a cloak to carry out an ethnic and economic agenda; an excuse to vent hate, and to legitimise and justify a lust for power and control over others. Again as history witnesses, in such cases, the clergy, rather than opposing these feelings and tendencies, often excite them, become champions of such programmes and pogroms. (To discuss here whether the Buddhism expressed in Sri Lanka over the past few decades represents the Buddha's teaching in its purity, would be a digression.)

The overwhelming majority in Sri Lanka seem to believe genuinely (if conveniently) that the whole

Island was destined to be Buddhist. Since the Sinhalese are Buddhists, it follows that Sri Lanka should be primarily for Sinhalese Buddhists. "Primary", at the least, implies "secondary"; secondary, in turn, means subordination: It's not our fault. The Soul of Greatest Compassion Himself decreed it. Our "dream" of a nation, although it visits a cruel and unjust "nightmare" on others, is now well on its way to being realized.

So, where "nation" is concerned, there are two diametrically opposed ideas and ideals. According to one, with the defeat of the Tamil Tigers, 'nation building' is no longer futuristic: *the nation has already been built!* Well, almost, though not quite. Contrastively, a minority feels that the work of 'nation building', although made harder, must now commence and that too, urgently.

Those who cherish the latter concept of "nation" face the Herculean task of presenting their counter-vision of "nation", and of persuading the overwhelming majority to subscribe to it. Professor K. M. De Silva, himself a Sinhalese, writes in his *A History of Sri Lanka*:

There was always a tendency on the part of the Sinhalese to equate their own ethnic nationalism with a wider, all-island one, to assume that these Sinhalese nationalism and Sri Lankan nationalism were one and the same (Colombo, 2003 reprint, page 496).

A multi-racial or multi-communal nation or state is incomprehensible to the popular mind (p. 512)

The out-spoken editor of the *Sunday Leader*, Mr Lasantha Wickrematunga, (murdered 8 January 2009 in Colombo), was posthumously honoured during the World Press Freedom Day (Doha, Qatar, 5 May 2009). I quote extracts from the statement by his widow (currently in exile for her safety), read out on her behalf.

Tens of thousands of ordinary [Tamil] Sri Lankan civilians - men, women, children, and the aged-have been herded into concentration camps where they are held against their will. There they languish in the most horrible of conditions, trapped behind barbed-wire fences and beneath the radar of [of the world's attention].

That this is a racist war is not a secret [...] the government itself has plastered the countryside with enormous placards lauding the military with the slogan, in Sinhala, the language of the Sinhalese majority to which I too belong, stating: "Soldiers, our race salutes you!" Not "the people", not "the country", but the race. Interestingly, none of these hoardings are in Tamil, the language of the people the government claims it is seeking to liberate.

Before construction commences, there must be agreement and clarity about what is to be built. At a Sri Lanka peace-conference in Germany several years ago, I observed that to discuss details of different federal models at that juncture was as premature as to work out the finer details of a wedding ceremony when the two parties had not agreed to the marriage. Similarly, those who write about “nation building” must first sell the attractions (that is, the virtues and principles, the goodness and the benefits) of the kind of nation they dearly wish for Sri Lanka. It will not do to delineate steps and procedures to realize this nationhood when the majority resolutely heads in the opposite direction. The majority must be convinced; must be persuaded to want and wish this alternate, inclusive, concept of nation.

Only then can the task of “nation building” really begin. If not, the small world mentioned above will earnestly and busily rotate while the larger world pursues its passionately desired and totally different end. I repeat: The initial, foundational, task is to persuade, not only the rural masses and the workers (a task, it must be emphasised, that must be undertaken in Sinhala) but even some highly educated Sinhalese professionals and academics. The last two categories include those

who live in Western countries (disregarding geography, I include Australia and New Zealand), expect, demand and enjoy that concept and practice of “nation” which they vehemently reject for Sri Lanka.

Endnote:

It should be acknowledged that multiculturalism is not without its dangers: for example, when a group with extreme and uncompromising religious beliefs and behaviour patterns occupies the same space as another group that is secular and grants a great measure of individual freedom and choice. In such cases, it has been argued, multiculturalism may retard the building of an over-arching sense of nationality, built on shared core-values.

However, this does not apply to Sri Lanka because there aren't fundamental religious differences between Tamils (majority Hindu) and Sinhalese, particularly (as noted by Dr K. S. Palihakkara, Nanda Godage et al) with the “Hinduisation” of Buddhism.

Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*

(A slightly altered version was published in *Montage*, Colombo, 18 June 2009 2009.)

The Sinhalese are by nature one of the friendliest people in the world but [they] can be easily but diabolically misled by Sinhalese racialists, who stop at nothing and are stopped by nothing, not even by the compassion of Buddhism, in order to whip up hatred against the Tamils to a frenzy. (Paul Caspersz, *Selected Writings* 1945 2005. Satyodaya, Kandy, Sri Lankan, 2005, p. 35.)

As I say in my essay, *Reign of Anomy* (see below), most of my friends were and are Sinhalese: "Though it may appear paradoxical, I must also say that they were and are not "Sinhalese friends" but friends who, among other characteristics far more important to me, happen to be Sinhalese." The comment by Paul Caspersz above and my own observation and experience, lead me to pick up some points from *Moral Man & Immoral Society* by Niebuhr (1892-1971): American, Protestant theologian, moral philosopher and political analyst. The book first appeared in 1932 but page reference here is to the 1960 (New York) edition.

During the succession of anti-Tamil riots, culminating in the pogrom of 1983, many a Sinhalese I knew related a private story of help rendered to hapless Tamil friends, often at great personal risk to themselves and their family. As in most such cases, such action affirmed human relations and humane values. In saving others, we save some part of our valuable, inner, self. But there was no public outcry against these acts of violence perpetrated on defenceless civilians. As I write (April 2009), several individuals have, with admirable honesty and courage, highlighted the present appalling human tragedy of children, women and men trapped and traumatised, injured or killed - on a shrinking sliver of land. But, again, there is no group outcry, no mass taking to the streets in outraged protest. *Germany and the Second World War*, (Volume 1X/1: German Wartime Society, 1939-1945), a publication of the Research Institute for Military History, Potsdam, Germany (2009) acknowledges that Nazism cannot be blamed only on a fiendish minority: it was the result of a certain politico-social "climate", a fundamental aberration on the part of large sections of society. Only a few beacons of truth shone in the darkness of denial and lies; of exclusion, injustice and violence. In terms of group attitudes and conduct, so it seems to be in Buddhist Sri Lanka. The question Niebuhr asks is

why our behaviour as members of a collective is much less moral (less sympathetic and just) than our conduct as individual human beings. Niebuhr explores this phenomenon, showing its complexity and eschewing facile antidotes.

Niebuhr suggests that our conduct as individuals is influenced by reason and an understanding of the needs and feelings of others. He describes this trait as "self-transcendence", that is, our ability to transcend our selfish self. But when caught up in a group, these 'other-than-self' attributes are vitiating, if not entirely destroyed. When we are within a group, there is little of reason to guide our conduct, less check on our impulses, less capacity for transcendence. Accepting generalisations (and myths) which, though an oversimplification, are very potent, our behaviour as a group is a shame to our ethics as individuals. In other words, as members of a group, we are ready to act in ways in which we, as individuals, would not.

The tragedy of human history is that we have been unable to match our collective (group) behaviour to the ideals we cherish as individuals (p. 9). Though we are individuals, we are also members of a society, a nation, a state. Inescapably, we exist within a group, and our group behaviour leaves much to be deplored and regretted. Indeed, our group-behaviour can encompass the unjust, the cruel, the horrific.

Niebuhr argues that patriotism (since it confines concern and care to the group to which one belongs) is at root a limitation of human imagination and sympathy. The sentiment of narrow patriotism can reach such a degree of potency that the state is given *carte blanche* to use all the power at its disposal (p. 92), irrespective of the damage, destruction and tragedy it wreaks on others.

The democratic method of resolving conflict, though it seems peaceful, can, in reality, be coercive since it depends on the vote of the majority. As members of a group, we accept (consciously or unaware) contemporary beliefs, assumptions and viewpoints (p. 246). Disappointed with what he has achieved in his own life, an individual may identify with the power-ambitions of his group (p. 18), and in that identification seek pride and compensation - never mind if my daily life is hard, if not wretched. There is no ethical action without self-criticism, but to criticise oneself there must be detachment and the ability to transcend one's self.

This transcendence is difficult to achieve at the group level. Though one can be critical of, and at the same time be committed to, a group, criticism is discouraged, being mistakenly seen as evidence of a lack of loyalty.

The damage caused by group action, or in the name of a group, is far greater than damage done by individuals. Social conflict caused by "the disproportion of power in society" will not result in justice so long as the disproportion of power remains (p. xvii). But it is difficult to remove disproportion of power because "group egoism" is resistant to all moral and inclusive social objectives. The rationalist stresses a lack of understanding of the feelings and needs of others, while the religious individual emphasises selfishness as the root of social injustice. The latter fails to perceive the elements of injustice and (covert) coercion which are present in society. Because he does not recognise the injustices which a so-called peace can hide, he does not understand the impulse to break the "peace" on the part of members of another group. These injustices "are not easily recognised because they consist in inequalities which history sanctifies and tradition justifies" (p. 233). We fail to realise the power, extent and persistence of group egoism in human relations, bearing in mind that relations between groups are predominantly not moral but political, that is, having to do with power.

Niebuhr cautions that violent resistance will accentuate animosities and prejudice. On the other hand, the absence of resentment at, and resistance to, injustice simply means either a lack of intelligence or of moral vigour (p. 249) or both. Writing in the first decades of the 20th century, Niebuhr cites the discrimination which African Americans then suffered on a daily basis. However many individual whites identify themselves with the African American cause, white America, as a group, will not grant equal rights unless pressured to do so (p. 253). Martin Luther King, in a famous letter to his fellow priests (written from prison in Birmingham, dated 16 April 1963) cited Niebuhr:

Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.

So how does one proceed? Can human beings ever achieve that degree of reason and sympathy which will enable them to see and understand the interests of others as vividly as they recognise and respond to their own? Niebuhr does not provide facile solutions

or hold out easy hope but neither does he advocate giving up the effort, the struggle. "The conclusion which has been forced upon us again and again in these pages is that [...] equal justice is the most rational ultimate objective for society" (p. 234). Indeed, if there isn't equality, then there cannot be justice. (One is reminded of George Orwell's satiric comment in *Animal Farm*: all are equal, but some are more equal than others.) Equality is a higher social goal than a "peace" that has been imposed by force (p. 235). In so far as reason tends to dismantle unjust power, it makes for the diminution of the strength of the stronger, and adds to the strength of the weaker. The most perfect justice cannot be established if the moral imagination of the individual does not try to understand the needs, interests and feelings of his fellow human beings (pp. 257-8). That we will ever achieve perfect justice is an illusion but, nevertheless, the illusion (and goal) is a very valuable one because "justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul" (p. 277).

Niebuhr does not simplify or sentimentalise. On the contrary, he shows the near-impossibility, given

our group attitudes and conduct, of achieving justice for all. Yet he insists that the effort must not be abandoned. It might seem crazy (“madness”) to aim at perfection but, even if we fail, we will still have arrived at a better more humane and just order of things than obtains in the sorry present. The hell or the heaven we experience in life is often of our own (human) making. Barack Obama (then a Senator) on the back cover of the new edition of Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History* (Chicago, 2009), describes Niebuhr as one of his favourite philosophers. Reinhold Niebuhr, writes Obama, recognises that much evil exists in the world; he acknowledges the almost insurmountable difficulty of combating inequality and injustice, and yet insists that we cannot give in to cynicism and inaction. As President Obama suggested during the recent (April 2009) G20 meeting in London, many may be blamed (for past action and present consequence), but it is now the responsibility of all of us to try to help build a better, more just, future.

Elections and emotional gratitude

(Published: *Sunday Leader*, Colombo, 7 June 2009)

I write this letter now (June, 2009) because elections seem to be at hand for Sri Lanka. On 7 May 1945, Nazi Germany surrendered, and the next day was celebrated as Victory in Europe Day (VE Day). Three months later (15th of August), Emperor Hirohito announced Japan's surrender. It was officially signed on the 2nd of September and brought the Second World War to its close. But between that May and September, a General Election was held in Britain, the first after ten years, elections having been suspended during the period of crisis.

Winston Churchill is generally regarded as the greatest war leader Britain has had to date. Unlike the LTTE leader whose goal was to form a separate, independent, state, the German leader's aim was nothing less than to conquer the whole of the British Isles. During dark and bleak days, with the rest of West Europe conquered (and prior to America's entry into the war), England faced Hitler and his army, reputed to be one of the best the world has ever seen, alone. During those testing times,

Churchill, by his presence and rhetoric, was an inspiring, rallying, figure: “we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.” It is not difficult to understand the sense of gratitude, admiration (bordering in some on adulation) and affection the British people of that time had for Churchill, their saviour.

Elections were held in July 1945, just two months after the war ended, and Churchill was confident he would be chosen by a grateful, admiring, public. But the people's preference was otherwise, and the great victor of the war lost. The Labour Party under Clement Attlee came in with a landslide majority, getting 393 seats while Churchill and the Conservatives won only 197. Most Sri Lankans (most being Sinhalese), see Mr Mahinda Rajapakse as their President-hero, the one who led the country to military victory over the Tamil Tigers. This being the case, an equivalent scenario would be if in Sri Lanka an election were held tomorrow, and President Rajapakse lost to a socialist party. If the response to this hypothetical parallel is an exclaimed (if not outraged) “Impossible!” would that necessarily be a positive reflection on the nature and wisdom of Sri Lanka's electorate?

It's not that the British were ingrates, but the country faced many and major problems of reconstruction and, while recognising and applauding Churchill's gifts and contribution as a war-time leader, the people felt that Labour would be better able to deal with the tasks facing the country. In other words, they rationally kept their electoral choice for the future of the country separate from the emotions of admiration, gratitude and affection for services rendered to it in the immediate past. That the British have not forgotten, and never are likely to forget, Churchill's war-time contribution is seen, not least, in his statue outside the House of Parliament: symbol of that system of government and way of life which he had helped to protect. Gratitude for military victory can, and should, be expressed in ways other than through election to the highest political office - that is, provided there are others better suited for the work at hand. The Labour Party assumed power and began much-needed social reconstruction and restructuring, for example, building the national transport and health systems.

Churchill believed in democracy - but only where his own people were concerned. On others, he would maintain the forcible occupation of their territory: "I have not become the King's First

Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire." He would not have agreed to withdraw from India, "Ceylon" and other British territory, unless compelled to do so. He was also a "racist": occupation of another's territory and "racism" invariably go together. Churchill said it was "nauseating" for him to see Mahatma Gandhi, a man "posing as a fakir of a type well known in the east, striding half-naked" up the steps of no less than the august palace of the representative of the "King-Emperor", and to talk with him on terms of equality. Military leaders are not uncommonly chauvinist. That is a great part of their appeal to the populace and their danger, and ultimate destructiveness.

It is hoped that Sri Lankans will, politically, be as rational, wise and mature as the British were then. This is neither to suggest that the present government is incapable of undertaking the task of reconciliation and construction ("construction" in more than material terms) nor is it to affirm the contrary. The intention is only to urge that, in making their choice for the future, the electorate will be guided by reason rather than be swept along by euphoria and an emotionalism in the flood of which a wrongly expressed sense of gratitude plays the major, if not the only, part.

A few paragraphs from 'Recollections of St Thomas' College, Gurutalawa: an extract from a personal memoir'.

(Published: *The Sunday Island*, Colombo, 5 July 2009.)

As is so often the case, we did not then understand the deeper meaning of the new movement gathering force. We didn't read the writing on the wall. But then, isn't the essence of youth not to be distrustful but to believe? (From Stephan Zweig's *The World of Yesterday*)

If I remember correctly, in 1950 St Thomas' College, Gurutalawa, had 214 pupils. Transported abruptly from geographically flat, dusty and hot Jaffna to Ceylon's "Upcountry", I fell in love with those mountains, with that climate and atmosphere. Long before the Tamil Tigers began their fight to establish a separate state, my personal wish was for a "separate state" consisting (on the lines of Virginia Woolf's 'A Room of One's Own') of one room and an attached bath somewhere Upcountry, a place to which I could retreat, at the least, during the European winter months. (I left Ceylon in 1963.) Perhaps, somewhat strangely, I was a Jaffna Tamil for whom Ceylon started in Kandy and went up. The poet Keats imagined that the Biblical Ruth working

in the fields felt even the corn to be "alien", though they were no different from the corn in the fields she'd known. Similarly, I found those mountains more beautiful than any other, anywhere else in the world. They stirred a deep emotion in me, while my response to mountains elsewhere was only aesthetic. (Since the emotional cannot be separated from the aesthetic, I suppose I should say "visual", rather than "aesthetic".) It is only over the last few years that I have, at last, managed to relinquish (a key word in Buddhism) those mountains; to see other mountains without making a silent, nostalgic, comparison; without feelings of deep loss. During school holidays, and after Gurutalawa, I lived with my parents in Dehiwela, by the sea. I spent many hours with friends in and by the sea there and down South in a Ceylon that had not yet been taken over by tourists, tourist hotels and commercialization. But, unlike the sea - restless, constantly in motion - the mountains have a calm permanence and strength. (My love for the hills and mountains was strengthened by the five years I spent in Kandy: four years at University; one, teaching at Trinity College.)

We had a cadet corps, with uniforms, .22 rifles and a shooting-range. Mr Amarasinghe, often seen with a pipe, was in charge. I remember him telling us

that, even as a man knows his own wife in the dark, so we must know the parts of the rifle, and be able to assemble it in total darkness, going by touch and feel. (Given our age, this was an exciting, though not an experientially comprehended, analogy.) If, while marching, a boy put the wrong foot forward, Mr Amarasinghe tied a handkerchief to the erring foot and, thereafter, called out *Leensu kakulla, nikkang kakuula* (the leg with the handkerchief, the leg without), rather than "Left, right, left". The derisive suggestion was that the culprit did not understand commands when given in English. It indicates the status English then had - and my reason for mentioning this, apparently insignificant, detail. Similarly, *Godaya*, in the sense of someone from a rural background, was a common, casual, epithet. City-dwellers, the world over, tend to be condescending towards rural folk, but *godaya*, as used in school, had another connotation: rural, ipso facto, not Westernised. This Western-orientated cultural condescension has much to do with the violent social and political reaction that, soon after independence, found expression.

Once, the swimming team went down to Colombo. The pool at St Thomas' was not available but Dr Hayman arranged for us exceptionally to use that of the Colombo Swimming Club. (I hope I

remember its name correctly.) Membership was for “whites-only”, even though Ceylon had gained independence in 1948. We were impressed with how clean and “shining” everything was. We didn't stay long, and the “white” people - no doubt, they had been informed and their consent secured - behaved as if we were not there, were invisible. The problem was with our Ceylonese waiters. They scarcely concealed their disdain, even though we were from an “elite” private school. I remember my mother (born 1908), going still further back and into British imperial times, telling me that the housemaids with “white” children or babies in their “prams” wouldn't speak to housemaids looking after Ceylonese children. This might seem exaggerated, if not incredible, and that is why I break off to mention it, to give a little insight into an aspect of social history. Barack Obama records (*The Audacity of Hope*) that, visiting Kenya and being in the company of his Kenyan cousin, they were ignored in a restaurant, attention being paid to “white” tourists. Once, when I was a child, something similar happened in Colombo, but my Uncle - he'd had military experience - strode up to the waiter, caught him by the collar and demanded, *Api Kallu nissaade?* (Sinhala for “Is it because we are black?”) The tourists were most embarrassed: they had not wanted

to break the queue; had not noticed we were there first. It is a historical fact that, during the centuries of white domination, white people believed they were superior in every aspect military and scientific; cultural and moral. But, as Achebe observes in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, the worst “sin” was that the third-world accepted and internalized this evaluation. I don't know if the expression is still used but among the highest of compliments that could be paid in Sinhala was *Uue Sudha vaage* “He is like a white man”. Someone feeling neglected or not properly treated would ask, “*Api kallude?*” “Are we black?” meaning, “Is it because you see me / us as black?”

The most popular teacher was the Rev A J Foster (MA, Oxford). Where history was concerned, he showed me, among other things, the relevance and importance of geography. A reflection of the time was that the emphasis was almost entirely on European, particularly British, history: the voyages of discovery, Nelson, Wellington and the defeat of Napoleon, the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions.

Those were very happy years though, during the first or second week, I had my first experience of what is known as “racism”. Involved in an argument with another boy, he called me “*Para Dhemala*”

(foreign Tamil). It is perhaps the most common abuse hurled at Sri Lankan Tamils, rather like the "Paki" in England for all Asians. Having lived in Jaffna, I was not conscious of my "Tamilness", there being no contrasting 'Other' to build ethnic identity and consciousness on distinction and difference. I was surprised, naively thinking, "So what? What has that to do with anything?" Being a Tamil then was a fact, one without importance or significance. Whether one was Sinhalese, Tamil, Burgher (there were several of them, this being long before the Burgher exodus) or Muslim weren't we all one - Ceylonese? Puzzled, I shrugged it off but, somewhere, it must have lain dormant, to be awoken by later events. Marcel Reich-Ranicki, in his autobiography, *Mein Leben*, states: „Meinen Eltern bereitete ihre Identität überhaupt keinen Kummer. Darüber haben sie... nie nachgedacht, nie nachdenken müssen“ (A rough translation would be: "Identity caused my parents no worry. They never thought about it, never needed to think about it." Emphases added.) But, being Jews, Nazism brought them all, violently and brutally, to face the question of identity. A separate (ethnic), rather than an inclusive, unifying (national) identity, was forced upon them, whether they would or not.

Dr Hayman was perhaps somewhere between forty and fifty then. I believe he got his doctorate in Physics when in his 20s, and it then being a very rare and high qualification, he must have had many openings and opportunities, but chose instead a life of service in the field of education. He was a thorough gentleman, decent and just; incapable of meanness or the unworthy. He was generous in the care of his pupils, even as he was generous in bringing into Ceylon his own money to build and maintain the school. But things did not turn out as he would have wished. The Island had gained independence in 1948 after almost five centuries of Western, Christian, rule. During this long span of time, Ceylonese culture in general, including religion (Buddhism and Hinduism) and language (Sinhala and Tamil), had been neglected, if not disregarded. Now, with independence, there was vociferous cultural assertion, an aspect of which was a rejection of things "Western". (The Tamils were next on the list. Unlike with the West and Westerners - powerful, admired, needed - the rejection of Tamils took a virulent, violent, form.) Private Christian schools began to draw hostile, public and state, attention. Foreign Christian teachers, missionaries, doctors and nuns were seen as allies and agents of Western imperialism.

I hope Dr Hayman had the insight and wisdom not to take things personally but to understand the broad, historical, moving of the templates. If not, he must have felt very hurt and sad. Generally, history does not make individual exceptions.

The lava flows heedlessly, sweeping down on the good and the bad without discrimination. Though we experience pain individually and personally, history itself is not personal. History targets abstractions - groups, categories, the other - and is blind to the fact that groups are made up of individuals, human beings, and that some individuals (like Dr Hayman and Father Foster), both for what they are and for the positive contribution they make, are good of a rare order, and very valuable.

Addendum

In response to the original, a former student wrote to me recalling that, subsequent to the anti-Tamil riots of 1958, when his (and other Tamil) parents came to Gurutalawa to collect their children for the holidays, Dr Hayman cautioned them: Tamil pupils were safe while on the "island" of St Thomas', Gurutalawa, but no longer within the wider Island.

Tissainayagam, Richard de Zoysa & Rajiva Wijesinghe

(Published : *Sunday Leader*, 20 September 2009.
Altered version.)

The 'reaction' cited below was published by you today (13 September 2009): it followed your reproduction of the statement made by Mr Tissainayagam in that court which handed down a sentence of twenty years hard labour on him. I quote *verbatim*:

REACTION Sinhala bloggers

“In 1989, Tissainayagam translated some documents on the human rights violations of then regime for (now President) Mahinda Rajapakse, a key human rights activist of the day, to be taken to Geneva. He was a hero then, but now a villain. Is this because then he was fighting for rights of the Sinhalese and now for Tamil rights?”

The question that concludes the above caught my attention. As I have written elsewhere, the whites who joined the struggle against apartheid in South Africa did not do so because they were “for” the blacks, but because they were against

discrimination, and the brutality (and resulting human suffering and tragedy) which accompany the imposition and maintenance of injustice. White Americans from the North who supported Martin Luther King's campaign were insulted ("Nigger lovers"), beaten and, in certain cases, murdered. Some of the most trenchant accounts I have read of Palestinian suffering are by individuals of Jewish origin.

One can identify three kinds of protest. The first would be if I were to suffer injustice as a member of a group; protest and work towards dismantling that injustice. A second kind of protest would be if I took an interest, for example, in the plight of the (to me) distant peoples of the Amazon rain-forest. It would be disinterested, since there is no hope of gain for me in expressing concern and indignation. (Increasingly, "disinterest" tends to be confused with "uninterested".) The third and the most challenging is to speak truth to power when that power is wielded by one's own group and, what is more, when injustice and force work to the advantage of one's own group and, therefore, it can be argued, to oneself. The examples I have cited from South Africa, the USA and Israel arguably come within this third, and highest, category.

To return to the question, "Is this because then he was fighting for rights of the Sinhalese and now for Tamil rights?", the sickness of ethnic division (call it primitive "tribalism", if you will) has gained such a hold in the Island that one now speaks of Sinhalese rights and Tamil rights, rather than of (fundamental, universal) human rights: human-rights recognise our common humanity, regardless of language, religion, sex or skin-colour. Writing about the late Adrian Wijemanne, I pointed out that his was a principled, essentially decent and caring, stance. Transcending narrow tribalism, he did not "fight for the Tamils" but for equality, justice and inclusion. If the Sinhalese had been oppressed, herded and corralled in prison camps, he would have been among the first to espouse their cause.

The position adopted by such individuals calls for rare courage and inner strength because they are execrated and abused as "traitors"; experience physical terror, even pay the final price of death. (The "cost" is borne also by those most close and dear to them.) At times of inhumanity, such individuals, their character and conduct, affirm our humanity, restore confidence, hold out some hope, give courage.

On the other hand, to go with the majority, to use unethically one's intelligence and "cleverness"

with language, has its rewards: public admiration and applause; media attention; appointment and promotion; entry into the higher circles of power (and the privilege and social status that that brings); invitations and deference. It is an intoxicating, addictive, cocktail that must make one feel successful, powerful - and smugly conceited. But it is a gaining of the "world" at the loss of what is best in us as human beings.

And yet, at moments of silent, honest, introspection, some of those who have "sold out" must look in the mirror of the past, see their earlier self and pause - however briefly, uncomfortably and hurriedly. As a poet wrote (albeit in another context) good is the life ending faithfully faithful to the values, principles and ideals one believed in and cherished. Many souls, as noble as they were modest, both Sinhalese and Tamil, have refused to be intimidated, declined to compromise, disdained dangled prizes and rewards, and paid the price. And this brings me (not without a sense of irony) to Rajiva Wijesinghe. It was he who, several years ago, drew my attention to one such individual: Richard de Zoysa, political activist and poet. I conclude with extracts from my resulting review.

[Richard de Zoysa] was well known: a human rights activist, a fearless critic of political

immorality and cruelty. As an actor (on stage and screen) and as a journalist and broadcaster, he reached many. In a time of unreason, of "racial" and political hatred and violence, he upheld the values of justice, decency and humanity. He was brutally murdered in February 1990, not having quite reached the age of thirty-two. His mother's attempts, despite State obstruction, to bring his killers to justice, excited national admiration and pity.

Sri Lanka is not without such individuals and, therefore (despite the present combination of suave falsehoods and appalling cruelty) not without hope of ethical and political redemption and renewal. When that awakening happens, many now wallowing in power and pride will be seen quite differently.

The Editor of the *Sunday Island* added the following. It must be noted that Mr Rajapakse's protest comes within the first of the three categories discussed, namely, fighting for one's own group.

"Totalitarian leader was once a young idealist fighting for human rights" - Excerpt

"The year was 1989. A violent youth insurrection that had terrorised the Sri Lankan populace was being brutally quelled by the state

establishment. Bodies were burned on rubber tyres and the charred remains were left on every street corner. Hundreds of corpses were polluting the major rivers of the island's south-west. Disappearances, arbitrary detention and revenge killings were the order of the day. With a government at the zenith of its power determined to crush the insurgency through force, leaving a trail of innocent victims in its wake, a young Sri Lankan opposition parliamentarian from the rural south decided to take a stand against the country's deteriorating human rights situation and the state terror being unleashed upon his fellow citizens.

“Travelling to Switzerland without a penny in his pocket and on an air ticket purchased for him by a friend, the young politician entered the building of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) in Geneva and parked himself in the lobby. Over several days, he waylaid every delegation passing through those halls, using each opportunity to tell members of the world community about the tragedy that was unfolding in Sri Lanka. So eager and relentless was the young man that he was finally given a special meeting at the UNCHR to present his case. Back in Sri Lanka he organised anti-government campaigns and founded organisations that looked into disappearances. He

was, if anything, the face of the agitation campaign against the regime of the day, the street fighter determined to secure the rights of the oppressed and release them from the brutal grip of state terror.

“That man is now Sri Lanka's fifth Executive President, elected to office in 2005. And so, beyond the signature moustache and the shawl he still wears around his neck, there is no resemblance between the starry-eyed Mahinda Rajapakse from Hambantota, fighting for the rights of his citizens in Geneva, and the corpulent, shrewd politician occupying the premier seat of power in Sri Lanka today. If we were to set aside the remarkable victory against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for just a moment, the other most significant legacy of Rajapakse's presidency is the veritable death of the free Sri Lankan media.”

- Special Correspondent, *The Independent*

A “great” military victory?

Published : *Sunday Leader*, Colombo, 25
October 2009.

It is the propaganda of the winners that enters the history books. The reputation of the losers is shaped by the winners. (*New York Review of Books*, February 2008, page 44)

How does one judge whether a particular military victory is “great”? During the years and centuries of Western domination, “native hordes” (*sic*), sometimes in their thousands, were defeated by a few hundred men. But that had less to do with courage, and much to do with progress in science, technology and fire-power. Conquest and exploitation; expropriation and settlement (America, Canada, Australia etc); the so-called “bringing of civilization” were all facilitated by cannon and musket, rifle and machine gun. Though told otherwise and perpetuated in legend, song and story, there is nothing “great” in such battles and victories

Numerical strength and resources also contribute to victory. The German army of the Second World War is rated as among the best the world has seen but, as a historian commented, after 1943, in every battle, the Allies had more of

everything than the Germans. After a certain stage, final defeat was inevitable. Jewish Bar Kokhva and his followers, though they fought fiercely and persistently, were wiped out by the Roman legions (136 Common Era), but the outcome cannot be termed a "great" Roman triumph: a very small, poorly equipped, army faced the mighty Roman Empire. The Battle of Thermopylae, 480 BCE, took place during the second Persian invasion of Greece. (See also the first Persian invasion and the Battle of Marathon, 490 BCE.) A force of approximately 7,000 men faced a huge Persian army. Though vastly outnumbered, the small force led by King Leonidas of Sparta blocked the only road by which the mighty Persian army could pass. After the second day of battle, a local resident betrayed the Greeks by revealing a small path that led behind the Greek lines. Aware that they were being outflanked, Leonidas dismissed the bulk of the Greek army, and remained to guard the rear with a few hundred men. Almost all of them were killed. The inscription erected in their honour reads: "Go tell the Spartans, / You who pass by, / That faithful to their precepts, / Here we lie." During World War 1, these lines were altered to read: "For Their Tomorrow, / We gave [sacrificed] our Today."

But numbers, numerical superiority, is not necessarily decisive. Alexander the Great was often totally outnumbered by the enemy. In Modern times, there is the example of the Six-Day War (June 5-10, 1967) when Israel fought and defeated the armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria also contributed troops and arms. At the war's end, Israel had gained control of the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights.

Sometimes, the discrepancy between two armies (in terms of number, equipment and resources) is not tremendous, and victory is owed to superior military tactics. Napoleon's greatest victory (Austerlitz, 2 December, 1805) was a brilliant trap that destroyed the combined armies of Russia and Austria. The French lost about 1300 men, while the Russians lost 11,000, and the Austrians, 4000. This victory, and other early successes, made many believe that Napoleon was invincible. It was a conviction which Napoleon himself, with fatal foolishness, held - and so it was for long the case with the Tamil Tiger leader. Given human nature, it is not surprising that human history is more than replete with battles, and one could go on citing example after example, from different places and time-spans.

Another aspect of military history is falsification. Repeated and repeated, handed down from generation to generation, celebrated in song, told and re-told in story, what was fabricated become truth in the people's mind. 'The Song of Roland' (*Chanson de Roland*), is a popular European legend describing how the brave and noble Roland was ambushed and murdered by (treacherous, vile, deceitful, cruel etc) Moslems. The truth is quite different. As Charlemagne retreated through the Pyrenees, he was harried by Basques and, in a mountain pass at Roncesvalles, the Frankish rear guard under Roland was destroyed. This Christian loss - Catholic Franks slaughtered by Catholic Basques - was transmuted over time into a fatal conflict between Christianity and Islam. Temporally much closer to Sri Lanka, there's the Battle of Plassey, 23rd June 1757. It was taught in schools, both in the UK and in the imperial territories, as a great victory in which 'Clive of India', with 800 Europeans (plus thousands of Indian soldiers, but this fact was downplayed) conquered the army of Siraj-ud-doula, Nawab of Bengal, numbering well over 50,000 men. In truth, the outcome of the battle was decided before the soldiers came to the battlefield. Mir Jafar, aspirant to the Nawab's throne, was induced to join Clive, and by

far the greater number of the Nawab's soldiers were bribed to throw away their weapons, surrender prematurely, or even turn their guns against their own army. (Siraj was brutally murdered by Mir Jafar's son, Miran.) Referring to this battle, Jawaharlal Nehru, in his *The Discovery of India*, comments that British rule in India had an unsavoury beginning. However, it must be admitted, frankly and honestly, that Western powers - be it in the Americas, the Middle East, Africa or Asia - did not (and do not) "divide and rule". We cannot reproach "*Divide et impera*", and shift the entire blame. Foreign powers, when they find a people already divided, make use of (where possible, exacerbate) existing suspicion, competition and hatred, and exploit these to their own advantage.

One of the remarkable features of *The Iliad* (among the most famous of Western texts) is that, though written by a Greek (or Greeks), for Greeks, and celebrating a Greek triumph, the courage exemplified by the enemy, the Trojans, is recognized and honoured, particularly that of Hector. Brutality is recorded (sometimes, in detail) but bravery, loyalty, skill, when exemplified by the enemy, are acknowledged. In other Greek works too, there is a measure of understanding of, and sympathy for, for the defeated Trojans, for example, in the portrayal of

Hector's wife, her city devastated, her husband killed, her son murdered; yesterday, a lady of high rank, loved and honoured; today, a slave dragged off into life-long exile. Similarly, Western historians, while taking full measure of the appalling atrocities committed by the German army during the Second World War, also acknowledge that they were very brave, disciplined and fought to the end - and even beyond.

However, in Sri Lanka, there doesn't seem to be that Greek generosity or Western objectivity and balance. For example: "Yes, the Tigers carried out acts of terrorism. Yes, they made fatal mistakes, but they also mounted a few carefully planned, and bravely executed, missions." Rather, the conflict is presented in the primeval terms of the clash of good and evil. The winning side is entirely and always good, if not noble; *all* on the other, *always* evil. Humanity denied and obscured, the enemy are made into demons. The winners are brave and patriotically self-sacrificing, while the defeated are but brainwashed fanatics; contradictorily, at once both cowardly and suicidal. There is no generous acknowledgement, nuance or objectivity. It is as in films and stories of a certain kind for children and naïve adults: the hero is totally good; the bad, totally bad, without a single redeeming trait or act.

This is not to defend the Tamil Tiger leadership. History shows they made a succession of catastrophic mistakes; committed many grave crimes (a secular term) and sins (a spiritual concept). The Tamils of Sri Lanka, defenseless, have been led to the worst situation ever in their history; into a crisis out of which whether, and in what form, they will emerge, is hard to predict. The LTTE leader was not receptive to advice; brutal of dissent; had little grasp of the wider, international, picture; was unable to recognize trends in time; was not flexible to radically change policy and tactics. His final, desperate, measure of forcing trapped and terrified children, women and men to act as a buffer (even when he must have realized that, heedless of the cost to fellow human beings whose only "crime" was to be born Tamil, the government was not going to relent in its advance) does not, to put it mildly, excite admiration. Having said all this, leaving aside political calculation and military strategy; quite separate from humanity and ethics, the attempt here is to ask whether the defeat of the Tigers can, with justification, be described, in *military* terms, as the great victory it is trumpeted to be.

To begin with numerical disproportion, exact figures are hard to come by but it is thought that, at their height, the Tigers perhaps numbered 30,000.

Towards the end, down to a few thousand (finally, a few hundred), they faced an army of (again, perhaps) 250,000. Then comes another aspect mentioned, namely, that of resources. The Tigers did not have jets and helicopters. Their mono, propeller, planes were slow and clumsy, and of no real military value. Rejected by foreign governments, the Tigers were as isolated internationally as they were totally surrounded in geographic and military terms. In contrast, the government of Sri Lanka received help and advice from several countries, even from those states in competition with, and suspicious of, each other. The Taliban fight in mountainous, inaccessible, terrain, while the Tigers occupied flat land, albeit forested. Sri Lanka being an island (and the government of the nearest country, India, implacably hostile), the LTTE did not have borders over which they could easily slip, regroup, recover and return to continue the struggle.

Fitting all this together, it seems to me *the wonder is not that the government eventually won but that it took so long* for final victory to be achieved. In short, the defeat of the Tigers cannot be classified as “a great military victory”. Yet, though not in military terms, it is a great victory, a watershed in Sri Lanka's history, with both immediate and far-reaching consequence in many aspects: ethnic, economic,

social, cultural (the last, including the religious). Though not a great *military* victory, the victory is still very great because the consequences are extremely significant (particularly for Tamils). This is not to say that government soldiers did not face danger and hardship; did not fight with courage; did not endure wounds and trauma; did not pay the ultimate price. No, the effort is to bring in some measure of objectivity and truth, balance and frank acknowledgement lacking in the present giddy euphoria, and orgy of self-congratulation.

Given polarization and enflamed feelings, I suppose the above will be met with execration by both sides, rather than with calm discussion. Freud, in his *Moses and Monotheism*, though himself a Jew and, what is more, though the suffering of the Jews under Nazism had started, suggests the startling possibility that Moses was not a Jew but an Egyptian. I quote from the beginning of the work, adding the final emphasis:

To deny to a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of its sons, is not something to be undertaken lightly especially by one belonging to that people. But *no consideration will move me to set aside truth in favour of supposed national interest.*

I am confident there are many Sinhalese and Tamils who have Freud's total, honest and fearless commitment to the truth. I am, therefore, also sanguine that an accurate and balanced account of the history of the Tamil Tiger war will eventually emerge. Truth may be one of the first fatalities of war but, sooner or later, it is discovered and resurrected.

Reign of Anomy.

This is a shortened and altered version of the essay published by Centurion Media, Chennai, India, 2007.

The title is adapted from the novel, *Season of Anomy*, by Wole Soyinka.

The work was, and is, dedicated to the memory of M. Shanmugan, Senior Superintendent of Police, and to Dharmasiri de Zoysa, Public Health Inspector from Balapitiya.

Preface

The things that impelled me into exile are also the things that bind me to what was once home.
(Adapted from A Sivanandan's novel, *When Memory Dies*.)

I write this personal statement on Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict with considerable misgiving. I am neither a trained historian nor a social scientist. I have neither their knowledge and analytic skill nor their phraseology and linguistic manner. Secondly, there is an element of scepticism in me, if not of pessimism: virulent rhetoric, repeated and repeated,

has shut ears to other sounds; closed eyes to other perspectives. Words, written or spoken, express attitudes and ideas which, if reiterated, take on a life of their own and are no longer examined, are assumed to be axiomatic. Thirdly, in a context where the middle-ground is all but eroded, I know I will antagonise both Sinhalese and Tamil. Some Sinhalese (*vis-à-vis* Tamils) refuse to recognise any fault and responsibility in Sinhalese attitude and conduct; some Tamils will hear no criticism of the LTTE (the "Tigers") and its actions, least from another Tamil. Fourthly, there's the misgiving that rather than stimulating thought and reasoned discussion, I will be met with personal abuse, even by those who don't know me personally: there is a tendency to substitute personal abuse and insult for discussion, and calm, reasoned, exchange. Fifthly, I write in English, though I have long held that far more important than talking about, or even for, the people, is to talk with them and to do that, one must speak in their language. Yet another factor is that the "reality on the ground" changes constantly, often nullifying the validity of what is said today. And still I write, answering an inner compulsion; if I may say so, a sense of obligation.

I do not claim that what I write is the single truth: experience and perspective differ; truth is multiple and complex. As Heidegger wrote, "What is known remains inexact, what is [thought to be] mastered insecure" (*Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 53). Besides, it's foolish to claim objectivity for, as Heidegger also commented, even objectivity is judged by a subjective self. Nor do I pretend that I can be exhaustive: I merely present my personal understanding, in the hope that the ensuing discussion, even disagreement, will make a small, but positive, contribution. Someone (a Tamil, a retired Superintendent of Police living in Australia) once wrote to me with a sense of having superior social sensitivity and tact that he never spoke of the ethnic conflict with his Sinhalese friends because he did not wish to upset them. But surely part of the problem is that there isn't enough communication between the two groups, each trapped in its own history, experience and thinking?

Truth is not truth unless it is spoken gently: see, Forster's *A Passage to India*. Developing this, one can say that even if what is said is true, if it is expressed unkindly, the other will get angry; in anger, she or he will reject the speaker; in rejecting the speaker, the

perspective s/he offers is dismissed, the case presented not considered. But, in some situations, it's almost impossible not to cause offence, provoke violent disagreement, anger, recrimination and insult. This is particularly true of politics. Thomas Mann said that in his time human destiny presents its meaning in political terms. So it has been, and is, in Sri Lanka. But, finally, the political translates into the personal, and is experienced, enjoyed or suffered, by individuals, often "lowly" but human: hence my sorrow and concern.

A class-based understanding of the conflict has been offered by several respected analysts, and their work has contributed much to an understanding of underlying causes. However, it must be acknowledge that class is not primarily pertinent to some conflicts. For example, Mandela states (*Long Walk to Freedom*) that the African National Congress rejected the claim of socialists that Black South Africans were oppressed essentially as an economic class, and not as a people. Indeed, issues such as "race", religion and language are so powerfully emotive that many are willing to damage, even sacrifice, their economic interest for one or more of them. To cite an instance, around the 1950s, there

was on the part of Greek Cypriots a demand for enosis with Greece even though, in the words of a writer, they knew that “Cypriot living standards would drop sharply once the island was yoked to chaotic, impoverished Greece.”

Since I am unknown, I must introduce myself. I was born (surname: Ponnuthurai) in Jaffna but moved with my parents while still in my early teens to Colombo. I went to school at St Thomas', Gurutalawa; studied for two years at St Joseph's, Maradana, and entered the University of Peradeniya. I graduated in 1961 and, two years later, left for London. Except for “Shun” (see dedication), almost all my friends were, and are, Sinhalese. Though it may appear paradoxical, I must also say that they were and are not “Sinhalese friends” but friends who (among other characteristics far more important to me) happen to be Sinhalese. In the same sense, I did not, about forty years ago, marry a German but a wonderful individual who happens to be German.

History

In Dr Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759), it is said that the present state of things being the consequence of the past, it's natural to ask what the causes are of the good we enjoy or of the evil we suffer. Some are ignorant through no fault of their own - for example, poverty, lack of educational facilities - but those who "voluntarily" remain uninterested in political (that is, in public) matters, unthinking and ignorant, may be accused of evil because they do not care to try to learn how "evil" and misfortune came about and, therefore, how these may be eradicated (Chapter 30).

Collective memory, fact or fiction, conscious or subconscious, is incredibly tenacious. The remembering of history unfortunately leads some to perpetuating that (constructed and contested) history. For example, the Orange Order of Northern Ireland deliberately parades through Roman Catholic districts of Belfast, celebrating the Protestant victory on 1 July 1690 at the Battle of the Boyne. Similarly, among the Sinhalese, stories from *The Mahavamsa*, particularly the triumph of Duttugemunu, are perpetuated. Battles fought in BCE influence thought and action in the present,

breeding pride and triumphalism, bitterness and fear or both. David Lowenthal in *Possessed By The Past* draws attention to a particular kind of history which simultaneously lauds and laments some fictional past; one which is mired in the obsolete, and breeds xenophobic hate. Driven by tribal demons, even victors persist in seeing themselves as threatened; as being perennial victims, thus justifying unjust policy and conduct. In order to highlight their own virtue, the vice and crime of the Other is magnified. The story of the Black Hole of Calcutta (20 June 1756) has been questioned, challenged, even ridiculed, but that has not stopped its enshrinement in British mythology (Jan Dalley, page 5). The eminent historian Eric Hosbawm, in an essay titled, "The new threat to history", warns that the study of history may not be an innocent activity. On the contrary, it can manufacture time-bombs. A people who are resentful of the past, disappointed with the present and uncertain about their future, turn to xenophobic nationalism and intolerance, and history then becomes the raw material for "racism". This brand of history is what a people learn from their family, priests and schoolmasters; from magazines, pamphlets, songs and television

programmes. If we are to be saved from "racism", history must be separated from myth and ritual (p. 63). Paul Valery wrote in his *Reflections on the World Today* that history is the most dangerous product ever concocted. Mishandled, history can intoxicate, saddle people with false memories, keep old wounds - real or imagined - festering and produce "the mania of persecution". Friedrich Nietzsche, in his essay, 'On the Use and Abuse of History for Life', warned that History is beneficial only if used in the right manner, and in the right proportion. He felt that the Germany of his time suffered from an excess of history - and so it is with Sri Lanka where the poison of myth and falsified history seem to have seeped into the groundwater.

Romila Thapar's *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History* is a remarkable study. It investigates the history surrounding a single event: the raiding of the temple of Somanatha in 1026 by Mahmud of Ghazni. (Ghazni is not far from Kabul.) Professor Thapar uses this one event to scrutinise how history is made, remembered and transmitted. Who remembers? What is remembered? How is it remembered? Why is it remembered? What function does the past play in the present? Thapar shows that

what is now remembered and transmitted as a Moslem depredation of a Hindu religious site is not accurate. The early Islamic rulers were not seen as being primarily Moslem, and there were Indians “of standing” in Mahmud's army - one may add, even as there were Sinhalese soldiers in Tamil Elara's army: see, W. I. Siriweera, 'The Dutthagamani-Elara Episode', in *Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka*. Hindu princes and rulers too raided temples if there was loot to capture and take away, but only raids and destruction wrought by Moslems are remembered, diffused in story and song, and passed on.

With these general statements on the writing and remembering of history, I move to the specific experience of Sri Lanka.

Modern conflicts, including those involving Tamils and Sinhalese, are reinterpreted in lofty historical terms, seeing in them something that is much grander than the shabbiness of contemporary politics. They are “interpreted as ancient feuds which allegedly place today's players in preordained roles in an allegedly ancestral play.” (Amartya Sen, p. 43.)

The Sinhalese and the Tamils, the Moslems and the Burghers, have now lived on the same small island

for centuries. After hundreds of years, is it important who came first? To me, the significance of "Who came first to the island and is, therefore, indigenous?" lies not in the answer but in the question itself - that hundreds of years later, the question should be asked, should be thought important. *It matters because it is made to matter.*

S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike was the Prime Minister under whom the "Sinhala only" act was passed, and he is "credited", among other things, with having championed the "Sinhala only" cause. However, Professor Yasmine Gooneratne (born Bandaranayake; a niece of S W R D Bandaranayake) suggests in her *Relative Merits: A Personal Memoir of the Bandaranaike Family of Sri Lanka* that the family name may have come from a Tamil officer, Neela Perumal, made high priest of the Temple of the god Saman, and in 1454 ordered to take the name of Nayaka Pandaram, that is, Chief Record Keeper. With time, the name changed to Pandara Nayaka, and thence to the present Bandaranayake. Similarly, there is evidence that the Salagama, Durava and Karava castes were originally Tamil, from South India, and that "Hettiarachige" derives from "chief of the Chettis". (The chettis are

described as “a Tamil trading caste”. See also, “Aryan” below.) Again, one wonders, “So what? Is it important?” Yes, it is important because we make it important. It is not the fact, but the value we attach to it, since we are the source of significance. (How long have Westerners been in America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand?) Irrespective of who came first to the Island, both groups have inhabited that space for hundreds and hundreds of years. Yet one encounters reference to “an alien Tamil speaking group with little or no history in the island” (*Sunday Island*, Colombo. 25 January, 2004, p. 7). Tamils are condemned to being forever para (“foreign”). As I wrote in my “Letter to a Sinhalese friend” (see above), I imagine a Veddha child (descendant of the autochthonous) wistfully asking, “Mummy, when will the Sinhalese go back to [India] where they came from?”

“The collapse of the ancient Sinhalese Kingdom of the dry zone is one of the major turning points in Sri Lanka's history” (K M De Silva, *A History Of Sri Lanka*, p. 81). The periodic invasions from South India which caused this collapse have left not only resentment, but have made the Sinhalese, the majority (70% and more of the Island), harbour the

fears, insecurities and complexes of a minority. Fear and insecurity spawn anger and hate; these, in turn, violence. The fear is that the millions and millions of Tamils in the South of India, almost all Hindu, will flow into and submerge the Sinhalese, their "race", language (spoken only in Sri Lanka) and religion. But this is to see ancient history through modern, "racist" spectacles. That the attacks were by Tamil rulers on Sinhalese kings was accidental, the point being that any ruler who felt he could expand or attack and ravage, happily did so: see, for example, Romila Thapar above. Unfortunately, ancient attacks from the mainland are seen, and worse, taught in schools, told in story and song, as invasions by (Indian) Tamils of the Sinhalese. The invasions, the killing and the pillaging, are not placed in the wider context of those times. It's not made clear that even if the whole of Sri Lanka had been Tamil and Hindu, it would not have stopped attacks by Indian kings - as the internal history of India clearly demonstrates. Nor was Sri Lanka passive. I again quote from Professor De Silva: As long as the Cholas were the dominant power, Sri Lanka allied itself with the Pandyas (p. 64); King Nissanka Malla of Sri Lanka not only sent an

expeditionary force to India, but accompanied the army himself (p. 65). When, by the middle of the thirteenth century, the Pandyas had established themselves as the dominant power in South India, they were inclined to *support the Sinhalese kings against the [presumably Tamil] kingdom in the north of the island* (p. 67. Emphasis added). The major portion of John Keay's *India: A History* deals with pre British-rule India, and one is struck by the many wars that raged: invasions from the North by peoples who were either ambitious or were themselves being driven out by other peoples; principalities and kingdoms against one another; rivalry between brothers; usurpation, even of fathers. Indeed, Britain could not have conquered what we today know as "India" (those beyond the Indus) if India's many rulers had not been more afraid of, and hostile towards, each other than of the British. As with the Native Americans; as with Africa, by the time the real enemy - Western colonialism and imperialism - and danger were recognised, it was too late. Sinhalese soldiers joined and helped the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British in their attacks on the Kandyan kingdom, and later Kandyan chiefs, unaware or heedless of imperial policy and action in

India, helped the British to secure Kandy. Africans facilitated the slave trade, and yet it is said that Africans did not barter or sell Africans - because the concept and identity "African" did not then exist. In modern Sri Lanka (as elsewhere), a collective identity that did not exist in the past is constructed, and then present generations are held responsible, reproached and penalised for the past when those who acted had no sense of such a collective identity.

Sinhalese identity

No doubt, there are several factors that explain why Sinhalese soldiers fought Sinhalese in the service of Western, Christian, powers but perhaps the case made by Professor R. A. L. H. Gunawardana (see *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*, edited by Jonathan Spencer) is of help. Gunawardana argues that the term *Sinhala* applied only to the ruling class and, by extension, to those closely associated with it. Sinhala identity did not include all those who spoke Sinhala. *The Mahavamsa* version sought to present the Ksatriya status of the ruling family, and did not include most of those considered "Sinhalese" today. Even in the 19th Century, some authors of texts in Sinhala refer to the last Nayakkar king as the *Sinhala maharajatuwa*, the great king of the Sinhala (p. 68). In other words, according to

Gunawardana, the term still had a political - and not an ethnic - reference. This claim, one that will fundamentally alter understanding and perception, attitude and behaviour towards Tamils, is not brought to public attention and discussed. That several kings and rulers from Sri Lanka married Tamil women from Indian royal families seems to indicate that (unlike at present), what mattered was high caste and not "race". Does this help to explain why Sinhalese soldiers helped foreigners to attack (what are *now seen* as fellow) Sinhalese?

Fall of Kandyan kingdom

The capture by the British of the Kandyan Kingdom at the beginning of the 19th Century is popularly projected as the result of Sinhalese nobles rising up against the Tamil king, the brother-in-law of the deceased Sinhalese king. But K M De Silva, himself a Sinhalese, states that the Nayakkar dynasty had "identified itself with the Kandyan national interest and blended the Nayakkar personality with the Kandyan background" (p. 222). It is significant that the people did not rise against the king "in support of either Pilima Talauve (in 1810 -11) or Ahalepola (in 1814)." And this, adds

Professor De Silva, in a region where “the record of resistance to unpopular rulers was almost as significant as the long tradition of resistance to foreign invaders” (p. 230). A pretender to the Kandyan throne appeared in 1817, “in the guise of a Nayakkar prince. This was Vilbave, an ex-bhikku posing as Doraisami, a member of the deposed royal family. That the pretender claimed to be a Nayakkar prince is a point worth noting, both as evidence of the Nayakkar dynasty's continuing popularity among the Kandyan and as an acknowledgement of their status as indigenous rulers” (pp. 232-3). The struggle was for power, status and influence: it was neither “racial” nor religious. Looking elsewhere, we read in Mani Shankar Aiyar's *Confessions of a Secular Fundamentalist* (p. 49) that the Hindu soldiers who marched on Delhi (mid-19th century) did so not to establish a Hindu India but to restore the last Mughal (Moslem) emperor to the throne. Kandy The Uva Rebellion [Uprising], 1817-1818, is presented, taught and disseminated as a Sinhalese uprising against the British, but it was essentially a Kandyan, and not a Sinhalese, struggle. For example, Solomon Dias Bandaranaike received a grant of one hundred and eighty acres of land and a

medal from Governor Brownrigg as a “reward for eminent service during the Kandian (sic) Rebellion A. D. 1818”. Translated, this means “reward for collaborating with imperial Britain against the Kandyan chiefs”. Even as late as the beginning of the 20th Century when talks were in progress to grant Ceylon independence, Kandyan leaders asked for a federal system, with a degree of autonomy for what had once been the Kandyan kingdom, referring to themselves as the Kandyan nation. From colonial times up to and including the 1971 census, Kandyan and Low-Country Sinhalese were classified as distinct ethnic groups. Now the Tamil having been made into the Other, history is either adjusted or forgotten and a Sinhalese identity proclaimed which did not then exist. The history that is popularly subscribed to is one that perpetuates resentment and deepens divisions. For example, it is not mentioned that a few of the Kandyan chiefs who were signatories to the Kandyan Convention of 1815 signed their names in the Tamil, rather than in the Sinhala, script (Spencer: 24). Evidently, it did not matter then, but now we make it matter to suit a divisive and destructive agenda.

Returning briefly to India and ancient fears, a Kandyan (like me, retired and living in Germany)

and I used to talk frequently on the phone. Off and on, he lamented that “the Sinhalese race” (deep down, emotionally, he continues to subscribe to the notion of “race”) is finished. Asked why, he replies that the Tamils will soon take over the whole island. I patiently explain it is most unlikely that 18% of the population would or could control the entire Island. In numerical and in practical terms, it is an impossibility; nor will India, the US and the UN permit it. He is temporarily reassured and comforted but, after a while, I hear again the same anxious sounds. The point I'm trying to make is that certain fears are deep-seated and hard to extirpate with fact and reason. If this man, living abroad, having access to the media and the internet, still harbours anachronistic beliefs and irrational fears, what of the rural masses in the Paradise Isle? The fear is fostered, in the face of evidence to the contrary, that India will help the Tamils: it's the “Tamil Tigers” (and not the JVP) who fought and expelled the Indian army from Sri Lanka; it is the Tigers who stand accused of assassinating Rajiv Gandhi; it is India which has objected to the Tamils in Sri Lanka being accorded anything that smacked of autonomy. On the one hand, there is fear of the horde, running into

millions, massed just across the Palk Strait, waiting to settle in little Sri Lanka; on the other, appeals are made to India to assume its “regional responsibility”, intervene and sort out matters in Sri Lanka which we are incapable of doing ourselves.

The Mahavamsa

This text is regarded as a foundational work, and it powerfully influences both the Sinhalese collective conscious and, even more powerfully, the Sinhalese unconscious: Carl Jung noted that the collective unconscious consists of mythological motifs.

The Mahavamsa is generally attributed to the monk Mahanama, brother of king Datusena. This last is significant in that it brings together two sources of power, political and religious, the one strengthening the other. Written in the 6th century of the Common Era, it relates the story of the Sinhalese kingdom from its foundation in the 6th century BCE to the reign of King Mahasena, 274-301 CE. In other words, it records a “history” starting about a thousand years earlier than the time it was written. I quote Professor Carlo Fonseka (*The Island*, 22 October 1995):

I do not find that reading *the Mahavamsa* enhances my self-esteem as a Sinhalese. On the contrary I feel greatly embarrassed and deeply humiliated when I learn that we the Sinhalese are the descendants of Vijaya, the banished profligate son of an incestuous marriage between (Sihabahu) and sister (Sihasivali) whose mother was so exceedingly lustful that only a real lion could satisfy her sexually. [The princess sexually stimulating a lion to mate with her has been attributed by some to the sexual fantasy of celibate monks.] Moreover, Sihabahu killed his leonine father, the king of the brutes [...] Thus, according to the *Mahavamsa*, brutishness, bestiality, incest, patricide and profligacy, were the stuff of our genesis [...] of the 54 rulers recounted in *the Mahavamsa*, 22 were murdered by their successors; 11 were overthrown; 13 killed were killed in battle and 6 were assassinated.

Fonseka also comments that the admiration for royalty (compare the fatuous adulation accorded to Princess Diana at her death) is misguided: "My heroes are among those who discovered how to harness the forces of nature to promote human welfare; diminished the load of human suffering

caused by disease; created things of beauty in music, literature and art." Emperor Marcus Aurelius (*Meditations*, written in the 170s of the Common Era) asked himself how one could estimate the true value of another person, and concluded it was by looking for the things to which that person gave value and importance. To Professor Fonseka, real heroes are not kings who extended territory at the expense of others or warriors who slaughtered a great many human beings, but those who have made a positive contribution to humanity; those who have brought some beauty to life.

The Mahavamsa records that King Dutugemunu, having caused the destruction of a great many lives, was concerned he would not attain nirvana. Thereupon, Buddhist monks comforted him, saying he had killed only one and a half men: the one was a Buddhist and the other only on the path to becoming a Buddhist. The others who died, being non-Buddhist, were but animals. "But as for thee, thou wilt bring glory to the doctrine of the Buddha" (*The Mahavamsa*, end of Chapter XXV). One is appalled that human beings can be seen and treated as if they were animals; incredulous that such an inhumane attitude could be proudly espoused in the name of the gentlest of religions. The Buddha in his

sermon on loving kindness (the *Karaneeya metha Sutra*) urged the cultivation of loving thoughts towards all:

May *all* beings be well and happy. May we cultivate boundless love for all beings. Let these thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world, without any hatred, without any enmity.

And yet *The Mahavamsa* seems not to be scrutinised, reflected upon and questioned.

Dr Mithra Fernando (Australia) comments that the "Sinhala Buddhist mindset has been nurtured in isolation, far away from the scientific historical facts." (In a message to me dated 22 May 2007, Dr Fernando says his article, though available on the web, has not been published as yet.) I do not know to what extent *The Mahavamsa* is actually read today, but material from it is transmitted orally, in the Sinhala language, by monks, teachers, parents, relations and journalists - material that fosters hatred, justifies inhumane violence; elevates cruelty and force to the level of patriotism, of virtue, even of spirituality. Returning to Dr Fernando's comment about the lack of facts, the Indian government wishes to deepen the waters between it and Sri

Lanka, so that it could function as a shipping canal. However, Hindu groups protest because it would damage the bridge, now lying under the sea, built (according to the Ramayana) by god Ram and his monkeys. The suggestion by the government that there was no real evidence for this claim caused outrage among some Hindu groups in India, and there was vociferous protest (September 2007).

As Professor K. Indrapala observes, present-day nations and regimes have a strong inclination to believe that they and their forebears have 'possessed' their present territory since time immemorial. Belief in the bond between 'blood' and 'soil' was one of the most powerful psychological motors of nineteenth century "racist" nationalism. This kind of "nationalism" dresses up myth as history. Nations are (historically) recent entities pretending to have existed for a very long time. Identity-history can lead to anachronism, omission, decontextualization and, in extreme cases, lies (pp. 12-13).

Even among those who recognise the work as myth, there are some who continue to emotionally believe in it. One is forced to view *The Mahavamsa* as a pernicious work, one that has wreaked horrendous damage. Sirima Kiribamune (1985), states that *The Mahavamsa* has superimposed on the conflict

between Elara and Duttgamani attitudes and feelings not present at the time. The Tamil king Elara, defeated by Dutthagamani, was a patron of Buddhism; he was not fighting a Tamil war, and there was no conceivable difference between the troops on the two sides. (The earlier chronicle, *The Dipavamsa*, does not make any reference to Elara's racial identity.)

Herodotus (circa 480-425 BCE) in his *Histories* wrote about a period about a hundred years before his time: *The Mahavamsa* relates stories, some as distant as a thousand years prior to the time of writing. Herodotus is known as the father of Western History because he is credited with being the first to undertake research and verification; compare authorities and attempt to estimate probabilities. No such attempt is made in *The Mahavamsa*. But while I dare say that *The Histories* are read today more for "story" than history (his story), *The Mahavamsa* is regarded as embodying literal truth because it is a written text. Some of those who believe it do so because they are simple-minded; others because they wish to accept it there is no historic or archaeological evidence to support the Vijaya myth. As Michael Roberts comments,

there is as much objective, verifiable, evidence for the Vijaya story as there is for that of Adam and Eve. (It must be noted that the absence of fact and objective evidence, rather than demolishing a myth can help in its perpetuation.) Apart from all the supernatural (non-rational, non-scientific) happenings recorded in *The Mahavamsa*, there is absolutely no corroboration, either in the Buddhist Canon or its major ancillary works, that the Buddha visited the Island even once - let alone three times. Peoples and tribes have what are known as originary myths twins suckled by a wolf and going on to found what became the Roman Empire tales that are fascinating but not taken seriously and acted upon.

According to *The Mahavamsa* (Chapter V11), the Buddha selected Sri Lanka as the place where his religion would be preserved in its purest form. Dying, he spoke to Sakka (Indra, king of the gods) and asked him to protect Vijaya who had just landed on the Island. Sakka, being otherwise preoccupied, handed over the responsibility to Visnu (also from the Hindu pantheon) the god who, according to *The Mahavamsa*, is like the blue lotus in colour. The Jews believe that Jehovah has given them 'the Promised Land'; Western Europe thought it had a sacred

mission to civilise and Christianise the rest of the world, and so they conquered, expropriated and exploited. The idea of divine election is extremely dangerous because it sanctions injustice and cruelty, the group believing that it is acting in a great, divine, cause. Such belief is used to justify - even compel - behaviour which, otherwise, would be ethically reprehensible: what greater cause than that of God himself? Richard Congreve, Bishop of Oxford, said that God Himself had entrusted India to Britain and, therefore, Britain had no choice but to hold on to its possession! (See, Ashis Nandy, page 34.) Richard Dawkins, in *The Selfish Gene*, shows that seemingly altruistic action can be traced to a selfish end: religious fervour, the readiness to carry out the most ungodly of acts in the name of god, the sacred or divine, can be similarly understood.

Etymologically, the word “education” comes from “to lead out”. But the broadening of horizons is also to better understand the starting place. As T. S. Eliot wrote in 'Little Gidding', “We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.” And so, looking elsewhere in order to understand the here and now, one notes

that the Bush administration of the USA believes it has a manifest destiny, a divine license; that the West has been chosen by Christ and entrusted with a mission: see, *New York Review of Books*, 15 February 2007, p. 54. Once again, I quote from Amartya Sen (winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, formerly Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and presently Lamont University Professor at Harvard):

The illusion of destiny nurtures violence in the world (p. XIV). With instigation, a fostered sense of identity with one group of people can be made into a powerful weapon to brutalise another. "Indeed, many of the conflicts and barbarities in the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity. The art of constructing hatred takes the form of invoking the magical power of some allegedly predominant identity that drowns other affiliations [and overpowers] any human sympathy or natural kindness". (op. cit., p. XV).

Professor David Little states in his work: "It is a central conclusion of this study that the claim to pre-eminence, tinted with notions of racial and religious superiority, must bear considerable responsibility for ethnic strife in Sri Lanka" (*Sri Lanka: The Invention of Enmity*, p. 158).

The Mahavamsa does have interesting and instructive stories: what needs to be altered is how the text is presented and interpreted. To cite an instance, Chapter V1 describes an act of patricide, the slaying by Sihabahu of his lion-father. The lion sees Sihabahu and “for love toward his son”, comes out of the cave, thus exposing and making himself vulnerable. Sihabahu shoots an arrow at him. It “struck the lion's forehead but because of his tenderness toward his son, it rebounded and fell on the earth at the youth's feet. And so it happened three times, then did the king of the beasts grow wrathful and the arrow sent at him struck him and pierced his body.” The story should not be taken literally but figuratively, as a tale that simply tries to teach wisdom and moral conduct; the Buddhist ideal of self-control and compassion: love forgives and protects. As long as there was love in the lion for his son, it was not “touched”. It is only when love is replaced by self and anger that we can be wounded. How we react to what happens to us is finally more important than what happens, etc.

Revolt in the Temple

Texts and their influence bring me to a modern work, D C Wijewardena's *Dharma-Vijaya (Triumph of Righteousness)*, better known by its alternate title, *The Revolt in the Temple*, 1953, published in Sinhala and English. Professor Kumari Jayawardena, in her study of ethnic and class conflict in Sri Lanka, describes *The Revolt in the Temple* as “rambling” and “openly chauvinistic” - descriptive terms that have also been applied to Hitler's *Mein Kampf (My Struggle)*. It puts forward legend as historical fact, and is a “totally romanticized and unhistorical view of the past, based on mythology, fantasy and racial 'destiny'” (Jayawardena, p. 69). An unfortunate inheritance can be traced from *The Mahavamsa* through the virulently “racist” Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933. See, among other works, Lawrence Zwier's, *Sri Lanka: a War-Torn Nation*, 1998) to *The Revolt in the Temple*. I recall that the book was widely read and lauded for its “plain speaking”. Even those who hadn't read the work, had an outline of its argument, and went along with it. Again, what is symptomatic and significant is the ready willingness of so many to be carried along, thoughtlessly and heedlessly, by the text. Like other

such inflammatory works, it pandered to a virulently “racist” political and social climate, and hence its immediate acceptance and popularity. Perhaps, the aura of scholarship and erudition, the exuding of righteousness and reason, even piety and virtue, helped to create this 'reception'. (One is reminded of Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* who wrote in lofty, compassionate and caring terms about the African, and suddenly ended with “Exterminate the brutes”.)

Vijaya was a Hindu, Buddhist conversion of the Island being reputed to have taken place about three hundred years later, thanks to the effort of Mahinda but, identifying “race” and religion, Wijewardena states that Vijaya and his followers were Sinhalese in heart and mind even before they left India (p. 31).

What it is that made them already Sinhalese is not explained, nor any evidence offered for the claim. The book seeks not to provoke thought but to arouse emotion and sweep readers along, unthinkingly. The birth of the Sinhalese “race” was not accidental but predestined - see Amartya Sen above - and the Sinhalese-Buddhist nation is divinely designed to carry “the Torch of Buddhism” for another 2,500 years, making a total of 50

centuries: Hitler, another Aryan supremacist, settled for a more modest thousand-year Reich. (The attraction of numbers to individuals and groups with such a mind-set; the use of certain numbers in incantation, spells and magic, is a subject in itself.)

Wijewardena quotes from a poem by Goethe which, roughly paraphrased, says that one must rise or sink; win and rule or lose and serve; be the hammer or the anvil. (Eventually, it's the hammer and not the anvil that's more likely to break. Meanwhile, the innocent nails, caught between hammer and anvil, suffer.) Wijewardena's is a ruthless Darwinism; Tennyson's nature, red with blood in tooth and claw, here wrapped in divine election and sacred duty. There is no awareness in Wijewardena that the difficulty and ethical obligation is to overcome what appears to be our innate, human, nature. "Among animals, man is uniquely dominated by culture, by influences learned and handed down. Some would say that culture is so important that genes, whether selfish or not, are virtually irrelevant to the understanding of human nature." (Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Chapter 1, "Why are people?").

Having advocated and justified domination, Wijewardena goes on to lament the deterioration of Buddhism, forgetting that the Buddha urged compassion towards all human beings, Buddhist or not. Either he did not realize, or did not acknowledge, that he (Wijewardena himself) is, therefore, an example of those who have betrayed the very essence of Buddhism, and caused its deterioration, its fall from the ideals preached by the Buddha.

The Sinhalese are Aryan, and the Aryan race is not only intellectually but, more importantly, morally supreme in the world (p. 33), asserts Wijewardena, blatantly ignoring history. The phrase, Aryan race, translates into "White" people. (I place "White" within markers because, as a character in Forster's *A Passage to India* observes, there are really no white human beings.) Western imperialism which lasted centuries, the African slave-trade, the horror unleashed on the Congo by Leopold of Belgium, the first and second World Wars, the near-extirmination of the Jews the list is long - these weren't perpetrated by non-White, non-Aryan people. One recalls the words of Mark Twain:

In many countries we have chained the savage and starved him to death; and this we do not care for, because custom has inured us to it; yet a quick death by poison is loving-kindness [compared] to it. In many countries we have burned the savage at the stake; and this we do not care for, because custom has inured us to it; yet a quick death is loving-kindness to it. In more than one country we have hunted the savage and his little children and their mother with dogs and guns through the woods and swamps for an afternoon's sport, and filled the region with happy laughter over their sprawling and stumbling flight, and their wild supplications for mercy; but this method we do not mind, because custom has inured us to it; yet a quick death by poison is loving-kindness to it.

In many countries we have taken the savage's land from him, and made him our slave, and lashed him every day, and broken his pride, and made death his only friend, and overworked him till he dropped in his tracks; and this we do not care for, because custom has inured us to it; yet a quick death by poison is loving-kindness to it [...]
There are many humorous things in the world;

among them the white man's notion that he is less savage than the other savages.”

(Mark Twain, *Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World*. Chapter XX1. Pages 189-192.)

David Brian Davis makes the point that humanity was in the “savages” and savagery in those who claimed to be civilized (*Inhuman Bondage*, p. 215). For an eye-witness account, one turns to Bartolome De Las Casas and his *Short Account* (1542): It was the Europeans who were the savages, and the Native Americans whose culture was poor, whose technology was non-existent and who had very few, if any, of the arts and sciences which for all Europeans marked the inevitable stages towards true civility, who were 'civilised'. (For a history of Latin America from the time the Europeans came ashore to the present, see Eduardo Galeano's powerful and damning *Open Veins of Latin America*; for a more general account of Western imperial and colonial action, see works such as Mark Cocker's *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold: Europe's Conquest of Indigenous Peoples*. See also Coetzee's novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, where barbarism is within, and not external, foreign.)

This is not to argue the contrary, namely, that non-White, non-Aryan, people were, and are, morally superior: all human beings have the potential to be savage and, when possessed with power (“possessed” also in the sense of being in the grip of “evil” spirits) have tended to misuse it, to the detriment of other human beings and the environment. I have dwelt on Wijewardena because his work leads me to “race” - a Romantic (with a capital R) belief in “race” is but a short step away from “racism”.

In an article titled 'The Term “Racism” and Discourse', published several years ago, I attempted to make the case that the word “racism” was unsatisfactory, being too vague, covering a variety of different forms of prejudice. In the West, “race” seems to be a coded way of referring to discrimination based on skin-colour: shouldn't one be specific and frank, and rather name this type of “racism” as “colourism”? Further, race, as popularly understood, has no scientific foundation. Race (sometimes incorrectly substituted for by the term “ethnicity”) does not exist, but “racism” continues to thrive and flourish, not least in Sri Lanka. Scientists have shown that the racial categories

utilised to divide people do not correspond with actual genetic populations. So too, the broad genetic populations that supposedly compose “races” are too genetically diverse for races to be meaningfully distinct from each other. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, in their *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, observe that “racism” leads to contempt, intolerance, violence, humiliation and exploitation. “Races” do not constitute isolable biological units but those with a certain mind-set, at a certain time in its history, construct and fervently believe in “race”. Presently, the old biological “race” has been replaced by a “racism” without “race”, one not based on blood and genes but on culture. But, racists argue, culture can be seen as nature, and so the biological returns with a vengeance. Racist organisations often refuse to be “designated as such, laying claim instead to the title of nationalist” (Balibar & Wallerstein, p. 37). The human genome has been mapped: in the words of the journal *Science*, “the internal genetic scaffold around which every human life is moulded”. The major impact of such studies is to reveal just how similar we are (from a genetic perspective, all

humans are African) not only to each other, but to other species. Prejudice, oppression and “racism” feed on ignorance. Knowledge of the genome should foster compassion, partly because the human gene pool is extremely mixed: stigmatizing any particular group of individuals on the basis of “race” is absurd. However, “racism” is irrational and, therefore, hard to combat with reason, science and fact.

Several states, particularly in the West, have passed laws that prohibit and penalise the inciting of hatred based on colour, gender, sexual orientation, religion, language and “race”. The UN has urged that the perpetrators of such crime to be “resolutely” brought to justice. It has also called upon those states that have not yet done so to consider including in their legislation laws that will punish incitement to group hatred; indeed, that it should be “an aggravating factor for the purpose of sentencing”. Were there such laws in Sri Lanka, many public figures, political leaders and Buddhist monks will find themselves in court.

Aryanism

The connotation of Arya in ancient Buddhist texts seems to mean “noble” or “excellent”, as in the *chattari ariyasachchani*, the Four Noble Truths.

Seen in this light, a Tamil can be an Aryan. Indeed, the Tamil honorific Aiyar, “added to so many proper names, is in fact ultimately derived from [...] Ariya.” Senake Bandaranayake (*Ethnicity and Social Change*, page 5.)

Sirima Kiribamune, in the paper already cited, reminds readers that the terms 'Aryan' and 'Dravidian' have entirely, and only, a linguistic, and not a racial, denotation. G C Mendis, in his *The Early History of Ceylon*, states that the word 'Dravidian' does not represent a distinct “race” but those who happen to speak languages classified as Dravidian. “It is difficult to gauge the extent of Tamil blood among the Sinhalese, but there is no doubt that it is considerable” (Mendis, p. 9): one recalls Daniel Defoe's comment, made in 1700, that the phrase “a true-born Englishman” is a contradiction, an irony, and in fact, a fiction: for “true-born Englishman” substitute, “pure Aryan Sinhalese”.

Martin Bernal, in his *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, says that “race” does not exist, and should not be important. But there seems to be a mystic belief in it; in

communion and communication not through reason, but via feeling and “blood”. The belief in “race” exists because it has been brought into existence in order not merely to emphasise group difference but to assert group superiority. The belief in an Indo-Aryan family, the Romantic belief in an Indo-European *Urheimat* (original home) somewhere in the mountains of Central Asia, was the product of the racist atmosphere prevalent in Europe in the late 18th and early 19th century. The black (African) nature of Egypt was emphasised in order to distance Egypt from Europe, and India (one includes Sri Lanka here) replaced Egypt as the exotic ancestor of Europe. “For 18th and 19th century Romantics and racists it was simply intolerable for Greece, which was seen not merely as the epitome of Europe but also as its pure childhood, to have been the result of the mixture of native Europeans and colonizing Africans and Semites” (Bernal, p. 2. In the original, these lines are emphasised).

Sir William Jones (1788) speculated whether the similarity between “Sanskrit” (sic), Greek and Latin could be attributed to accident. Perhaps, they sprang from a common source? B.C.Clough, who produced the first Sinhalese-English dictionary (1821) picked

this up, and applied it to the Sinhala language. Friedrich Schlegel, a German philosopher who believed India had helped to civilize Europe, used the term 'Aryan' in 1819 to designate people whose languages seemed to be related. A few decades later, we find Max Muller using the term, 'Aryan race', though he later was emphatic in saying that 'Aryan' is inapplicable to race.

Bernal (op. cit, p. 236), states that Western imperialism ensured the natives learnt about their own civilization only through Europeans and European scholarship: "This provided yet another rope to tie the colonial elites to the metropolitan countries." But among the Sinhalese, the Aryan myth is not only of the elite, not of the few, but of the group. For example, the 'national dress' worn by males was known as the 'Ariya Sinhala suit'. (No Sinhalese kings have been referred to as Ariya. In fact, it was the dynasty which ruled in Tamil Jaffna who called themselves Arya Cakravarti, or Arya emperors: "It is an irony of history that in later times it was the Sinhala who came to be associated with the term Arya". See, Gunawardana in Spencer, op. cit., p. 74.) Of course, as Western imperialism

consolidated its grip on the Indian subcontinent, respect and admiration gave way to condescension and contempt: in Darwinian terms, imperial subjects had proved themselves inferior, having been unable to defend themselves the most fundamental requirement for group survival.

The Sinhalese attitude to imperial Britain was (and is) complex and contradictory. On the one hand, there was deep resentment the consequence of which I will come to later but, on the other, admiration for Western power (scientific and military) and other attributes such as discipline and organisation. Though defeated and ruled by European powers for almost half a millennium, the Aryan affiliation (from the end of the 19th century) helped the Sinhalese to redeem a measure of self-respect. It provided a prestigious pedigree, relating them to the advanced 'White race'. If the 'Aryans' had been an impoverished people, bereft of power and science, an association with them would have been contemptuously rejected. Yet once again: we believe what we like, and need, to believe. It was a salve to the Sinhalese that they were defeated, and ruled, exploited and insulted by their "own", fellow,

Aryans. (Similarly, some Tamils say that, if they are to be tyrannised, they would prefer being tyrannised by the Tigers than by the Sinhalese.) So it is that one still comes across sentences such as the following: "The Kandyan Chieftains really exchanged the Nayakkar Dynasty with the Windsor Dynasty of England who were of Aryan stock replacing the wholly alien Dravidian power" (*Sunday Times*, Colombo, 4 March 2007, p. 4.) The British deceived and betrayed the Kandyan chieftains, but the result was rule by fellow Aryans - something preferred and, therefore, a consolation.

Kumari Jayawardena, in her work already cited, presents evidence showing that in the 1930s, the myth of Aryan-ness led some to admire Hitler, to wish for a Sinhalese Hitler to stop the degeneration of the Aryan Sinhalese "race", and to make it pure and triumphant. In 1939, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike was favourably compared to Hitler because he expressed violent nationalist (read "racist") sentiments and determination: see, David Little, *Sri Lanka: The Invention of Enmity* (p. 61). If Hitler had, however briefly, occupied "Ceylon", Nazi ideology, attitude and conduct would have been bitter

disillusionment to those Sinhalese who foster fond ("fond" also in the earlier meaning of "foolish") belief in belonging to the Aryan family of "races". It would have been a cruel shock, but it may have also been curative. In contemporary terms, one imagines a Sinhalese, Aryan-believing individual (or group), meeting up with a neo-Nazi band in the West, proclaiming his Aryan-ness and expecting a brotherly embrace. Sri Lankans in the West know that, if and when there is "racial" prejudice, what usually counts is skin - colour - not whether one is "Aryan" or "Dravidian". V G Kiernan says that "White" people had the impression of belonging to one "race". See also, Theodore Allen's *The Invention of the White Race*, London, 1994.

However, given the degree of irrationality in human beings, my imagined encounter between a Sinhalese "fondly" believing in his Aryan-ness, and a neo-Nazi Aryan group in the West, may not effect a cure: of the almost fifty million killed in the Second World War, about thirty million were from the former Soviet Union. Despite that history, despite Nazi contempt and devastation, people of colour in Moscow and other cities - Aryan or not -

have been warned this year (2007) to stay indoors around the 20th of April because Russian right-wing gangs would be celebrating Hitler's birthday. Belief is impervious to reason.

Imperialism

In the strict sense, what happened in India and Ceylon was imperialism and not colonialism because, unlike in America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand (and for a while in Kenya and Rhodesia) people from the West did not settle in large numbers, did not "colonise", the sub-continent. However, the word "colonialism" seems to have become an umbrella term, like "racism", and now includes "imperialism".

Of the many consequences of centuries of Western, Christian, rule I will mention two. Imperialism submerged, rather than merged, the Island's different ethnic groups. Foreign intervention and control for almost five-hundred years arrested what I would describe as the indigenous historical development of Sri Lanka. Left alone, the different ethnic groups would have fought but, over the centuries, reached an accommodation. (Of course, no country is left free of external

influence and interference, but five hundred years of continuous foreign domination is a considerable chunk of time.) Secondly, imperialism meant forcible occupation, oppression and exploitation. Whatever empires may have achieved and contributed, their basis was (and is) the ability to wield far worse violence than the violence defenders could (or can) deploy.

Imperialism, particularly British imperialism, was based on, and expressed, utter contempt: contempt for the natives, their colour and person; history and all aspects of their culture, including religion and language. The Buddhist monks who had enjoyed patronage and prestige at the royal court were marginalised. All public business - government, administration and commerce - was conducted in English, and those not proficient in English (the vast majority) were disadvantaged and made to feel inferior. These are some of the factors that created a reservoir of resentment, seething, potentially virulent but inarticulate because of imperial control. Nehru in the speech made at India's independence said that "the soul of a nation, long suppressed, [now] finds utterance": in Sri Lanka, it seems the Sinhalese soul at independence was sorely bruised, angry and bitter, confused and

impatient. Reaction found vent not on the British - distant, powerful, grudgingly admired - but on the Tamil.

I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

(Extract from 'September 1, 1939' by W. H. Auden)

For example, the Palestinians pay the price for centuries of insult and cruelty inflicted on the Jews by Western Christians, culminating in the Nazi holocaust. One is reminded of Shylock in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* who said that a good student tries to be better than his teacher. Western Christians "taught" the Jew insult, humiliation, unkindness, and these he would try to practice in turn, but in a "better" (that is, worse, more terrible) form. Independence was granted, the British left, and the Sinhalese, long "taught" by imperial rule, felt the time for rectification and restitution had come. Unfortunately, the majority of Sinhalese felt that the way to regain what had been lost over the centuries was by continuing to deny to the Tamils what the latter too had lost. There followed the politics of exclusion and subordination;

the politics of asserting one's dignity and rights by denying the dignity and rights of others; the politics of not allowing to others what was wished and demanded for oneself. Though the Tamils were not against the use and development of the Sinhala language, what prevailed and found expression was the unjust and unkind politics of "only", the result of thinking that one could best protect one's language by denying to others the right to use theirs. So, it was a case of "Sinhala only" and of the Sinhalese being the only true Sri Lankans. What is enjoined on the individual - treat others as you yourself would like to be treated - is not practised by the group. Multiculturalism, toleration and inclusiveness urged, and sometimes enjoyed abroad, are rejected at home. I recall these lines, for purpose of comparison, from Andrew Wheatcroft's *Infidels: A History of the Conflict between Christendom and Islam* (2004): The two alternatives in Granada after 1492 and the expulsion of the Moors were "the cautious and painstaking approach" and the violent and abrupt. "There had been no systematic campaign of forcible Islamization in Spain after the Muslim conquest" (see, p. 140). The Sinhalese government too had a choice, one that was wise, cautious and kind; the other, abrupt and unjust. It opted for the second.

During parliamentary debate on what was known as the language issue, Dr Colvin R De Silva famously warned that the forcible imposition of one language would lead to two nations; two languages to (the continued existence of) one nation. Ten years later (1966), Professor G C Mendis, in his address as President of the Ceylon branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, pointed to the lack of wisdom. The Sinhalese had little need to learn the Tamil language, but Tamils, if it had not been forced upon them, over time, would have learnt Sinhala, and the language problem would have been solved, gradually I may add, imperceptibly and painlessly. But, as one who was caught up in the ensuing attack on Tamils (1958), it seemed to me that the wish was not to be wise, not to be kind, but to express power and that disregard which power permits; not to heal but to humiliate: *oderint, dum metuant*. A rough translation of these words of the cruel Emperor Nero would be, "Let them hate, as long as they [also] fear". Fear and hate can coexist but they lead to an emotional, if not political, parting of the ways.

Disproportionate Tamil success

It is asserted that at independence Tamils enjoyed positions in administration and the civil

service completely disproportionate to their minority status. I am unable to access actual statistics which will either confirm or contradict this claim, but Michael Roberts suggests evidence to the contrary in his *Sinhala-ness and Sinhala Nationalism*. I think it is more a matter of a vague (envious and resentful) impression, rather than of fact. Similarly, some "Whites" see dark-skinned people everywhere. Such "Whites" and right-wing groups exclaim that their country is being swamped, taken over, by foreigners. This fear is the product of deep-rooted insecurity, and its dire and exaggerated expression creates insecurity in the rest of the population, alarms the herd into panic and defensive aggression. But the reality is otherwise and statistics show that the number of so-called "coloured" people constitutes a very small percentage of the total population. Crimes committed by persons of colour are "seen", highlighted and reacted to as being crimes perpetrated by "Blacks", while those carried out by "Whites" are simply seen as criminality. So too, Tamils holding jobs or posts were seen as Tamil, creating the impression, fear and resentment that they were too successful: in this connection, see the article on Martyn's Jaffna, above. (Currently, there

is the fear, created and deliberately excited by those on the right-wing, that soon Europe will be taken over by Muslims, even though Muslims account for only 3% to 4% of the European Union's total population of 493 million.) But for the sake of discussion let us assume that there, indeed, was a disproportionate number of Tamils holding government jobs or doing well in business. Still I would argue that if there were a need to redress matters, how it was done was unjust and unwise.

If the Tamils were disproportionately successful, the reasons must not be sought in some unscientific, inherent, "racial" makeup. Why, in the past, did African Americans take to, and excel in, sports and music, both of which entertained white audiences? Because other avenues of employment (except the most menial) were blocked, and the education of African Americans discouraged by the system. Why, in the past, were Jews moneylenders? Jews were not permitted to own land; were barred from skilled professions, and lending money on interest was looked down upon by Christians who, therefore, shied away from the practice. The Jews were then a reviled, persecuted, minority in the various countries in which they lived. If the situation arose,

money and jewellery were not only easily transferable but were useful in buying help or protection. In short, the only way in which they could survive was through trade and money-lending. Equally, if the Tamils were disproportionately successful, the explanation must be sought objectively, in facts: the arid nature of the North (in contrast to the lush, fertile, South); the lack of plantations and commercial centres; the absence of industry, a developed harbour or gem mines. Almost the only avenue of escape was through education, qualification and employment, either in the professions or in government service.

An auction in "racism"

At auctions, the highest bidder is successful but what we saw in Ceylon was a political auction where the person who bid the lowest won: "Sinhala only" in twelve months; twelve weeks, a month, a week and finally S W R D Bandaranaike won with the minimum bid of "Sinhala only in twenty-four hours". It was not "Sinhala in twenty-four hours" but "Sinhala only". With a stroke of a pen, most Tamils were rendered "official illiterates". English, the language of British imperialism, had been replaced by Sinhala. The more "racist" a politician

proved himself or herself to be, the more hate-filled and inconsiderate, the more he or she was recognised as a “patriot”. Hatred, intolerance, and violence become proof of patriotism, of a “nationalism” based narrowly and exclusively on “race” and Buddhism.

Buddhism

Most Sinhalese being Buddhists, the role played by Buddhism and the Buddhist clergy must be addressed. The following thought is taken from David Scott's *Refashioning Futures: Criticism After Postcoloniality* (1999). Until comparatively recently, the Pali and Sinhala languages did not have words representing the concepts “religion” and “Buddhism”. No doubt, pious men and women in Sri Lanka pondered a good deal about the Buddha and his teaching but, until about two hundred years ago, they had not thought of “religion” in its modern sense of a systematic entity, as being one among a family of such distinct religious entities. Kitsiri Malalgoda writes that the term *agama* as the general equivalent of “religion” was introduced by Christian missionaries in the 19th century. “It was only later that it gained acceptance among the Buddhists themselves as a term of self-reference”: see Scott,

page 57. In the past, philosophy, ethical injunction and religious teaching was not only a set of propositions but a way of life.

The Buddha and Christ are said to have lived the life they taught and enjoined: there was no fracture, much less contradiction, between doctrine and practice. The impression is that monotheistic faiths, with their exclusive and exclusionary belief in one god, one message and one truth breed intolerance, while religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism are eclectic, accommodating and tolerant. One could be a theist, a pantheist, a Communist - even an atheist - and still be a Hindu or Buddhist. Indeed, the true Buddhist is an atheist.

As I have argued elsewhere (unfortunately), all too often, religion does not determine the nature and actions of a society. Rather, it is a people who, at different times, determine the nature and behavioural expression of a religion. So India's BJP has damaged Hinduism's reputation for tolerance, and the Buddhist monks of Sri Lanka are associated with stoking hatred and violence. Not to focus too narrowly and intensely on Sri Lanka, and in order to place matters in a broader context, one recalls that Christianity was used to sanction the exploitation

(and near-extirpation) of the native peoples of South America, slave-labour in America, the veritable nightmare of Leopold's rule in the Congo, and imperialism in general. "Gentle Jesus" gave way to "muscular Christianity" and Christians became soldiers marching in the name of Jesus to conquer and pillage, rule and exploit hapless peoples. Nor should one forget the slave trade in Africans, castigated by Lord Palmerston in the House of Commons (16 July 1844) as follows: "if all the other crimes which the human race has committed, from the creation down to the present day, were added together in one vast aggregate, they would scarcely equal [...] the amount of guilt which has been incurred by mankind, in connexion with this diabolical Slave Trade." Today, the Neo conservatives of the United States are willing, even eager, to unleash violence for the sake of civilization that is, democracy and Christianity. Their repeated call to "engage with moderate Islam to counter a militant Islam that carries out terrorist acts," is inaccurately worded. It is not Islam but moderate or extreme individuals and groups who happen to be Moslem: see the difference between Islam as practised by the Emperor Akbar, and that expressed

by his almost immediate successor, Aurangzeb. Going further back in time, during the European persecution, many Jews found protection under Moslem rulers. In the 12th century, the Jewish philosopher Maimonides fled to Saladin and was given an honoured place at court. (Salah ad-Din, born in Tikrit, 1138, is known by many in England because he defeated Richard the Lionheart.) One recalls too that when the Crusaders captured Jerusalem, they killed as many Jews as they could; when Saladin liberated the city, they were protected and left in peace. The Caliph Abd al-Rahman turned Cordoba into "one the most civilized places on earth", helped by one of his deputies, (Jewish) Hasdai ibn Shaprut.

Buddhism is the gentlest and wisest of doctrines. G C Mendis writes (op cit) that the Buddha was a teacher, and the core of his teaching had to do with the individual developing his or her self - one may add, through cultivating characteristics such as self-knowledge, an all encompassing compassion, detachment and self-control. Regarding gentleness and wisdom mentioned above, I would refer readers to Dr K. S. Palihakkara's *Buddhism Sans Myths & Miracles*. The book states that Dr Palihakkara was

formerly “Director of Pirivena Education (temple schools)... and also one time Secretary to the Oriental Studies Society (which conducts examinations mainly for the Buddhist clergy.)” Dr Palihakkara's effort is to rescue Buddhism from myth and miracle; superstition, metaphysics and ritual, and to present it “as close as possible to the actual words of the Buddha” (p. i). The scriptures were first written about four hundred years after the death of the *Maha Karunika* (the Being of Great kindness) and, by that time, even the earlier Theravada texts had been corrupted by later additions. Buddhism as taught by the Buddha is essentially an ethical doctrine. There is no creator god, and neither past birth nor future rebirth. Since there is no past life, *karma* means action in the past of one's present life. However, belief in *karma* is useful to those wielding power (be it political or religious): when the poor and the outcastes of society suffer from “poverty, sickness and squalor in their hovels”, their suffering is attributed to bad *karma* from past births. The unfortunate are led to believe that they themselves are responsible for their misery (p. 120). The Buddha did not have miraculous powers and, rather than this being an insult, “he appears even greater without

them” (p. 28). The Buddha did not visit Ceylon (as claimed in *The Mahavamsa*). Indeed, there is no reference to him visiting even any other part of India “outside the Gangetic Plain” (p. 25). It is difficult to reconcile chanting *pirith* and tying the *pirith* thread with “a rationalist like the Buddha who rejected prayers and slokas (recitals) of the Brahmins to their gods” (p. 66). In short, what most Buddhists in Sri Lanka practice today is more Hinduism than Buddhism (p. 109).

Political Buddhism

Turning from this representation of Buddhism (as already stated, a rational and essentially kind and gentle doctrine) to the reality of its expression today in Sri Lanka, we find a total and most unfortunate divergence. Indeed, it can be argued that Buddhism as preached and practised today has proved false to Buddhism. As Godfrey Gunatilleke points out in Michael Roberts (Ed.) *Sri Lanka. Collective Identities Revisited*, Vol. 11, the revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka did not take a lofty moral or an inward, spiritual, form. On the contrary, it found vociferous and violent expression, and the presence today in Parliament of members of a political party made up of Buddhist monks is the inevitable result of this

participation in public life. Sri Lanka is in danger of becoming a theocracy, like Iran, where important decisions in all spheres of private and public life must have the approval of the clergy. The Bandaranayake-Chelvanayagam Pact, to which I will refer later, was abrogated because Buddhist monks descended on Mr Bandaranayake's residence. (Bandaranayake was assassinated in 1959, not by a Tamil but by a Buddhist monk, even as Gandhi was killed not by a Moslem but by a Hindu; even as Yitzhak Rabin was killed in 1995 not by a Palestinian but by a fellow Jew.) Regarding the Pact, Bandaranaike said that, reflecting in the light of Buddhist precepts, he had come to "an honourable solution":

In thinking over this problem I had in mind the fact that I am not merely a Prime Minister but a Buddhist Prime Minister. And my Buddhism is not of the "label" variety. At this juncture I said to myself: "Buddhism means so much to me, let me be dictated to only by the tenets of my faith, in these discussions." I am happy to say a solution was immediately forthcoming. (Colombo: *Sunday Observer*, 2 March 1958.)

In signing the Pact, "Banda" (as he was popularly known) claimed he was acting as a Buddhist, that is, according to what the Buddha had preached. It is ironic and unfortunate that finally he was "dictated to" not by the Buddha and Buddhism but by Buddhist monks:

"The present national crisis would not have arisen had we allowed the implementation of the Bandaranayake-Chelvanyagam Pact without resorting to the short sighted policies we pursued [...] the Pact was designed to mete out justice to the Tamil community [...] The late Mr J R Jayewardene provoked us in order to politically capitalise for his benefit [...] It is pertinent to mention here that I went to Jaffna when I was 15 in 1941 with my Nayake Thera. At that time, Mr Jaya Pathirana's father [Sinhalese] was a Jaffna Municipal Council ward member."

(The Venerable Mawatagama Vimalagama Thera, as quoted in *The Sunday Observer*, Colombo, 01 June 1997, p. 27.)

If Buddhism is given the highest place, it follows that those who most represent that religion, its clergy, will also enjoy power and prestige. Following,

it could be argued that the demands made by the monks were not motivated by lofty spirituality but for the secular position and power they believed they had wielded and enjoyed before the coming of Western, Christian, hegemony. The protestation is Buddhism but the goal is power. One recalls Durkheim's observation that in highly and overtly religious cultures, God and society are one. Thus, in worshipping God, people are in fact worshipping society - ultimately, themselves. It follows that in an ostentatiously religious society, priests, monks and religious leaders enjoy the highest position and authority. And where there is cultural and ethnic plurality, religious identity becomes ethnic identity, leading to a state that is both theocratic and ethnocratic.

The Sri Lankan experience must not be seen as being unique: the world over and throughout human history, members of the clergy have participated in public life, religion being a potent force in the mobilisation of the masses. (Roman Lucretius, c.99 - c.55 BCE, wrote of men using wickedness in the name of religion; that religion is a potent force in propelling men to evil.) Returning, in the context of Buddhism, to the distinction made earlier

between what is remembered, and why and how it is remembered, the discovery of Buddhist artefacts in the Tamil North of the Island is given a political, hegemonic, significance. The finds are not used to establish an earlier coexistence and harmony, a borrowing and incorporation. K M Panikkar states (*A Survey of Indian History*) that the exclusiveness of religious doctrines is a monotheistic concept: for instance, the Emperor Asoka offered gifts both to Hindu priests and to Buddhist monks.

The observation has been made that the Buddhist clergy is passionate only on the ethnic problem: they do not march vociferously; do not “incite” the people, on issues such as crime, violence, poverty, prostitution, paedophilia, police brutality, social injustice, corruption in high places, and moral decline. (I write “in high places”, mindful of the saying that when a fish turns bad, the rot starts with the head, and works its way downwards.) The issue that excites and mobilises the majority of monks is the ethnic question where their stance is right-wing in the extreme, though there are also monks such as the Venerable Nandaratena Thera, chief priest of a vihare in the Trincomalee district. He worked for ethnic co-existence, and was shot on 13 May 2007.

Since 'effect' implies 'cause', an attempt must be made to understand the 'political Buddhism' rampant in Sri Lanka. Again trying to retain a broader perspective, one looks at Sikhism, founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539). It was a pacific movement, and Sikhs were "anxious to live at peace with their neighbours", as one writer expresses it. But the fifth Guru, Arjun (1563-1606) was killed, and this violence helped to transform the Sikhs into an armed brotherhood. (The military nature of the Sikhs was completed by Gobind Singh who became the last of the Gurus in 1675.) Returning to Buddhism, one reads in David Scott's work that, though the Christian missionary societies were aggressive, the Buddhist monks did not retaliate. On the contrary, they reacted to aggression and insult with kindness, hospitality and generosity. But this attitude of forbearance changed around 1860. The present (ungenerous and violent) nature of Buddhism has imperial, Christian, roots. David Little (already cited) observes that both the aggressive Catholicism of the Portuguese and the militant Calvinism of the Dutch left behind a record of religious oppression (p. 11). The first experience of religious intolerance in Sri Lanka came with [and because of] the Christian missions (p. 12).

Proud to be Sri Lankan

Reflecting on *The Mahavamsa*, "race", Aryan-ness and political Buddhism, brings me of the defiant assertion made by some (almost invariably Sinhalese) that they are proud to be Sri Lankan. Oddly, this emotional declaration is also made by Sinhalese who have voluntarily chosen to leave the Island of which they claim to be proud; by those who have returned to the island having made money or won reputation which proud Sri Lankan circumstances did not permit.

The dictionary defines "proud" as the feeling of deep pleasure or satisfaction, the result of one's own achievements, qualities or possessions or those of someone with whom one is closely associated. Taking up collective achievement in the present, I wonder how much justification there is for national pride. There are slums in and around the capital, and people live in "shanties" in the most insalubrious of conditions, often by canals and stagnant water. It is a distressing, near-overwhelming, experience to walk down Colombo's Galle Road in the late evening, and see misshapen creatures settling down by the pavement for the night: scenes out of the novels of Dostoevsky and Dickens. For them, the Paradise Isle

is hell, seemingly, accepted fatalistically. There is a high degree of crime and violence. Amnesty International reported that over 4,000 people have “disappeared” in the short period since early 2006 and the date of the report - 12 April 2007. Victor Ivan in his *An Unfinished Struggle* (2003) cites Harold Laski's statement that the manner in which justice is dispensed in any country is the measure of that country's civilization, and concludes that, based on this criterion, “Sri Lanka is at the lowest level of civilization”. (The International Bar Association Human Rights Institute's report, titled 'Sri Lanka justice in retreat', dated 29 May 2009, states, *inter alia*, that Sri Lankans, particularly Tamils, are unprotected within the criminal justice system.) The police force is corrupt and, rather than protecting the population, tends to bully it, Tamils with greater impunity: see, 'Being Tamil today' below. A few years ago, the Asian Centre for Human Rights reported that political patronage and resulting impunity have turned the Sri Lankan Police into one of the country's most feared and organised criminal gangs. Sri Lanka is a destination for sex tourists, including paedophiles. The suicide rate is high, as is that of alcoholism, and women

(supposedly from a traditional, conservative, island) go abroad into helpless servitude: I once taught in the Middle East, and am well aware of their plight. Individuals in power have paid or rewarded followers who can be mobilised at short notice to form a righteous, patriotically outraged, mob. As for the people, they seem to have given up hope of real, qualitative, change, and get on with their daily lives, snatching distraction and recreation when they can. Unemployment, poverty and the lack of hope are some of the factors that explain the propensity to sudden, extreme and vicious violence. There is a schizophrenic gap between rhetoric and reality. Cricket is an exception, and the achievement of the team in international fixtures partly explains the passionate interest in the game by a people who have little other real cause for pride. According to the *Daily Mirror* (1 May 2007), while Sri Lankans are obsessed with cricket, the country is burning and breaking apart, and one in every 18 Sri Lankan is a refugee. Of course, the Island is beautiful, in terms of its beaches, mountains and valleys, and one can delight in them, draw solace and strength, but can we take “pride” in landscape and seascape? In other words, is it our achievement? I read the following

lines in the *Sunday Island* (25th January 2004, p. 7):
Despondency, deep, deep despondency and the
desire to cry for this ill-fated land of ours.

Then there is the other part of the definition of “proud”, namely, “someone with whom one is closely associated”. Since Sri Lanka was conquered and ruled for almost five hundred years, one indeed has to go back a very long way in time to locate those “closely associated” (that is, unless one includes the “White”, “Aryan” imperialists). How “closely” can one be linked with figures lost in the distant mist of History? The other aspect of ancient history is that we know it almost entirely by the “peaks” of achievement (tanks, statues, palaces), and events (battles, changes made and reform instituted). The daily life of the vast majority of ordinary women and men is not recorded, remains largely unknown and conjectural. That being the case, the past becomes our pliant possession, to be shaped as we wish. The operative words in this exercise are “idealise” and “idealisation”. It is a need and a process - particularly seen in a people who have little cause to be proud of and celebrate in the present. To cite a mundane example, given the lack of penicillin, surgical instruments and present-day knowledge of hygiene,

health-care must have poor and painful, as in other parts of the world. Of course, there were wise and kind rulers, but the fact remains that there was no middle-class, and no civic right for the people to elect their rulers. There is no avoiding the truth: it was feudalism in the extreme, with power on the one side, and servility on the other. Chandima Wickramasinghe in her comparative study of slavery in ancient Greece and ancient Sri Lanka, records the incident of a slave woman, eight of whose children "were buried as soon as they were born, by order of the master" because she had to look after his children (p. 45.) The same work recounts that Kings and nobles offered food to thousands of Buddhist monks, food that had been cooked by slaves.

The attempt here is not to discredit the past; not to deny that a measure of example and encouragement, even of pride, can be derived from it, but to plead for a more balanced, realistic, view of the past. It is easy to idealise and wax sentimental over the past, simply because it is past, and we can shape and believe in it as we will. One can be "proud" but one must also be clearly aware of the grounds for that pride. If not, it becomes an empty assertion: vague and easy to trumpet, emotional and

potentially dangerous. Further, “pride” can lead to complacency, take away the responsibility and effort of “constructing” (and I don't mean building only in the literal sense) in the present, in the here and now: it is enough to defiantly proclaim, “I am Sri Lankan, and proud of it.” Wole Soyinka saw the “Negritude” assertion as a symptom of insecurity: a tiger does not need to proclaim its “tigritude”, he wryly commented.

Addendum

The jubilation at the defeat of the Tamil Tigers, May 2009, can be understood but one wonders about the pride which accompanied it. An army of nearly 200,000 soldiers, supported by various other governments, equipped with fighter jets and attack helicopters, defeated, after almost thirty years, an army of a few thousand who had not one helicopter and whose so-called air force seems to have consisted of two, slow and clumsy, single-propeller planes. Seen in this context, the wonder is not that the Tigers were defeated at last, but that it took so long. Pride and boasting can mask embarrassment and shame, as Tagore notes in his *Nationalism* (1917).

Section 2:

Terrorism, 1983, the Tigers

“*Terrorist*” is now the term of political abuse, freely used and misused. As with my thoughts on History, I begin with “terrorism” in general before moving on to Sri Lanka. Terrorism can be understood as (a) the unleashing of haphazard violence (b) on the civilian population. It follows from the definition that (1) attacks on military personnel or installations is not terrorism, and (2) that the state can also act in terrorist fashion by visiting violence on civilians, even if the pretext proffered is that terrorists are harbouring among them.

The label “Strawberry jam” on a bottle leads one to assume that the content is strawberry jam. So it is with “terrorist”. Stick on the label, and most, without further thought, will take the content for granted; will believe that content and label tally. But neither abuse nor labels encourage reflection and analysis. On the contrary, political labels foreclose reflection and understanding. The aim of those who use the term “terrorism” in this fashion is to make independent thought seem unnecessary; create fear and arouse anger.

One must make a distinction between two kinds of "terrorist" group: one with an international, even global, agenda; the other, with a specific, local, aim. Terror is usually resorted to when the struggle is asymmetrical, that is, where one side in a conflict is at a significant disadvantage. The thinking seems to be that, if there isn't an equality of power, then let there be, if not an equality of fear, then at least some measure of it. Governments can go shopping on the open, commercially competitive, market and furnish their troops with the best weapons of destruction, while oppositional groups must rely on weapons seized from the government, or buy at an enhanced cost, and bring them in at great risk. The unleashing of terror is an attempt to redress imbalance.

Moving on, one remembers that Nelson Mandela (now seen by some as exemplary, almost a saint) was once branded a terrorist by former UK Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. Menachem Begin was accused of blowing up the King David Hotel (22nd of July, 1946); declared a terrorist by the British government, and a reward offered for his capture. Begin went on not only to become Prime Minister of Israel but to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Yitzhak Shamir, who also became Prime Minister of Israel, is alleged to have been involved (in what was

termed the campaign of “personal terror” to force the British out of Palestine) in the assassination of the UN mediator, Count Bernadotte of Sweden, in September 1948. Altering the famous words of Sir John Harington (1561-1612) about treason, one can say that terrorism never succeeds because, if and when it succeeds, it ceases to be seen as “terrorism”. If and when he is successful, yesterday's terrorist is today's recognised, respected, leader.

This is not to condone acts of terror, whether by an individual, a group or by the state. Sir Bernard Crick, in the course of a lecture on political violence delivered at Birkbeck College, university of London (14 June 2006), said that to understand is not necessarily to condone. By way of example, I remind readers of the massacre of Armenians by the Turks, towards the end of the 19th and in the early 20th century. These acts of state-sponsored terrorism can be explained as the product of Turkish humiliation and vengefulness, resulting in turn from successive Western military success, and increasing Western intrusion in Turkish affairs. It explains, but does not excuse the horror of that holocaust.

Sir Bernard also observed that, because we are law-abiding, we go along with what the state does; indeed, we give tacit support to the very acts of the state which cause terrorism; which “excite and

anger the terrorists". Violence, whether on the part of the terrorist or of the state, "too often arises from a failure to pursue political or diplomatic solutions". I repeat that the attempt here is not to defend the reprehensible but to urge analysis and thought. After all, Sri Lanka is largely a Buddhist nation and, etymologically, "Buddhist" is derived from enlightenment; enlightenment comes from knowledge, and knowledge is not the product of emotion, abuse and violence but of reason and understanding. Robert Pape (*Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, Random House, 2005) offers foreign occupation as the prime cause of terrorism, and Louise Richardson (*What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Terrorist Threat*, 2006) argues that terrorists are not crazed maniacs but individuals rationally choosing a tactic they think (correctly or not) will further their political ends. The 'Final Report' presented to the UN Secretary General on 13 November 2006 by the 'High-Level Group' states that injustice and inequality fuel violence and conflict. "Wherever communities believe they face persistent discrimination, humiliation, or marginalization based on ethnic, religious, or other identity markers, they are likely to assert their identity more aggressively" (3.13). The Report also points out that state terror has done far

more damage than that unleashed by terrorist groups. To their list of the Holocaust, the Stalinist repression, the genocide in Cambodia, the Balkans and Rwanda (3.12) one can add the two World Wars, North Korea, Burma under the military junta, certain dictatorships in Africa and South America, China under Mao the list is long, and the destruction and death caused by governments is much more gross (the word "greater" is inappropriate here) than that carried out by "terrorists". Indeed, there is no comparison. In the First World War, 15% of the casualties were civilians; in the second, it reached 50%. This destruction of life was caused not by terrorist groups but by states.

And yet, it is not state terrorism but that carried out by individuals and groups that make the greater impact. The reasons are several, among them that adduced by Sir Bernard Crick, namely that governments, even if they come to power by illegitimate means, once in power, are seen as legitimate and, therefore, their actions as legitimate and justified. Terrorist acts are dramatic and draw much media coverage, and civilians identify with the victims: It could have been me, or someone I love, in that bus or train, building or market. Governments (with their influence over, if not

control of, the media) highlight “terrorist” attack in order to discredit the enemy, to arrogate more power, and to vindicate their own policies. Reaction and consequence are made use of to justify policy and action; the effect to justify cause. Since “terrorists” operate from the shadows and remain anonymous, their thought remains unknown to us, heightening a sense of irrationality and madness. On one day (Wednesday, the 18th of April 2007), a single bomb placed in a market in the Sadriya district of central Baghdad killed over one hundred and forty people. Dozens die daily in Iraq, and over four million have fled the country, making it perhaps the largest exodus since Palestinians were “terrorised” into fleeing their land sixty years ago, their 'right of return' denied by Israel. Almost every day, a few die in the North or East of Sri Lanka. Deeply grieved over by family and friends, they are unknown to the world and unnoticed. Evil does not cease to be evil because there exists a counter evil. Tragedy is heightened, not lessened, because there is counter tragedy: anger and mutual blaming blind us to this fact.

Moving specifically to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (known in short as the Tigers), I find myself holding pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that do not fit. I was born in Jaffna, but spent barely the first

fourteen years of my life there. Looking back, I recall a place that was peaceful and quiet. The soil not being arable, the people worked hard, and lived simple, one would say, austere, lives. There seemed to be neither taste nor scope for self-indulgence or consumerism. (Sinhalese friends who visited the North of that time confirm my recollection.) In contrast to the "timid Tamil", the South, particularly along the coast, had the reputation of volatility, with men carrying fish-knives and being quick to anger. I find my memory of the North, this piece of the jigsaw, difficult to fit with the present image of the Tigers, and of the North as a battleground. Lines from a poem by W. B. Yeats ('Easter, 1916') come to mind: "Transformed utterly...changed, changed utterly". Those who are against them will see the Tigers as brainwashed fanatics; those who support them, will use other words such as courage and self-sacrifice, perhaps quote from *The Bible* that there is no greater expression of love than laying down one's life for the sake of others (John, 15: 13). But neither execration nor admiration leads to understanding.

Satyagraha

Returning to history, with the Sinhala-Only bill, there began the plea, and the (peaceful) protests of the Tamils. As M. R. Narayan Swamy writes, the

Tamil leadership, over the years, had virtually begged and cajoled for concessions, but successive Sinhalese governments turned them down (*Tigers of Lanka*, p. 14). With reference to the word "concessions", it must be pointed out that Tamils reject the condescending term, seeing their struggle as one for human rights and civic equality.

The person most identified with this peaceful phase of the Tamil struggle is S. J. V. Chelvanayagam, a soft-spoken man; like Mahatma Gandhi, frail in figure but strong of soul. "SJV" based his struggle on satyagraha (the force, or strength, of truth) drawing inspiration from Gandhi's non-violent campaign against the British. But in India, the weapon of Satyagraha had been deployed by a majority against a very small (occupying) minority. The parallel did not apply to Sri Lanka because, Island-wide, the Tamils are a small minority, and because of the ready willingness of the Sinhalese government and a section of the Sinhalese people to meet peaceful protest with brutal violence. In this respect, the genius of Gandhi (as I see it) is that he chose the right weapon for the specific conditions obtaining in India - spiritually elevated, ethically sound and *politically effective*. Gandhi, in his own words, was "overwhelmed" by Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, a work

he read in 1894, while in South Africa. However, his campaign of satyagraha on behalf of the Asian population there brought little result. Non-violent protest by the Jews against the Nazis would have been ludicrous and tragic. Nor would it have succeeded against a Pol Pot (Cambodia) or a Saddam Hussein (Iraq). Prayers, fasting and "sit-down protests" by the Tibetans against Chinese occupation have not succeeded. Gandhi himself commented that a mouse cannot be said to "refrain from hurting a cat": see Tidrick, page 126. The mouse must first acquire the means of retaliation and then, voluntarily, refrain from violence. That is the true moral and spiritual nature of satyagraha.

It seems the Sri Lankan government thought that if mob violence were unleashed on peaceful protestors, they would be cowed into an acceptance of a subordinate status. Those performing satyagraha on Colombo's "Galle Face Green" were assaulted and spat upon. A senior, respected, member of the Federal Party was stripped. He ran into the nearby Galle Face Hotel for shelter, jeered and laughed at as he ran. There were anti-Tamil riots in 1956, 1958, 1961, 1977, 1979 and 1981 - I deal with 1983 separately. In short, peaceful protest brought only humiliation and suffering. I think it will be acknowledge that, until the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was no Tamil retaliation.

In the list of non-human damage, destruction and consequent hurt, one must include the burning down of the Jaffna Library, the flames consuming thousands of books and texts written on ola leaf - irreplaceable. The destruction of a library is an act of barbarism, a loss to humanity of knowledge and culture (in the general sense of the word). Like other such acts of vandalism, this one has also been blamed on security forces temporarily running amok. (In this context, the term "security" is ironic.) However, Nira Wickramasinghe (and other writers) suggests government instigation, pointing to "the presence of two important government [Cabinet] ministers in Jaffna at the time" (*Sri Lanka in the Modern Age*: see Note 64, p. 285). In Germany, on 10 May 1933, crowds in which students were well represented, burnt books, particularly those by authors who were Jewish, including Freud. Much earlier, the German-Jewish poet, Heine, had written that those who burn books today will burn human beings tomorrow. That came to pass with the Nazi Holocaust and, in 1983, in blessed Sri Lanka.

If one wants to understand the Tigers and understanding does not exclude criticism or condemnation one must honestly and frankly place their action against this background of History. As Nelson Mandela notes in his autobiography, *Long*

Walk To Freedom, it is the oppressor, not the oppressed, who dictates the nature of the struggle. The title of Professor K. M. De Silva's study, *Reaping The Whirlwind*, is taken from *The Bible*, Hosea, Chapter 8, Verse 7.

The full quotation reads: For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind. But in Sri Lanka it seems that earlier generations sowed the wind, and have left an awful legacy, one where the present persists in sowing and reaping violence and tragedy.

Apart from the major anti-Tamil riots I've listed, there were incidents which are too minor (though not for those affected, the bereaved) to find space in the historical record. For example, at Bindunuwewa, Bandarawela, Tamils, aged between 14 and 23, were massacred on 25 October 2000: ironically, they were in a state-run 'rehabilitation' centre. There was a massacre of civilians in Chemmani, 1998, the evidence of mass graves thereafter destroyed. Tiger retaliatory massacre has established a balance-sheet in the popular mind; set in motion the cycle of counter-violence; mutual recrimination and blame. In such an atmosphere, historical antecedent and a step-by-step development are cancelled out or forgotten.

It must be borne in mind that it did not always appear to be a situation of enmity and conflict. There was a time when most, if not all in the Island, irrespective of language and religion, equally took a measure of pride and encouragement from ancient achievement, temple and lake; an equal measure of happiness in being "Ceylonese"; a time when Tamils described themselves as Ceylonese and not (as some Tamils tend to do now) as "Sri Lankan Tamil". When in 1915, D. S. Senanayake (later the first Prime Minister of independent Ceylon) and his brother, F. R. Senanayake were jailed by the British authorities, Tamil Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan went to England to plead their case. On his successful return, jubilant crowds placed him in a carriage, detached the horses, and dragged the carriage themselves. He was not seen as a Tamil who had helped free a Sinhalese, but as a Ceylonese helping a fellow Ceylonese. Perhaps then there was not that phrase which unconsciously betrays group assumption and prejudice in various parts of the world and situations: "even though he is..." In 1925-6, when Bandaranayake, as leader of the Progressive National Party, set out the case for a federal political structure for Sri Lanka and made this the main plank of the political platform of his party, he received no support for it from the Tamils: K M De Silva, p. 513.

In the 1930s, the Jaffna Youth Congress rejected federalism. (They looked not to Tamil Nadu but to Gandhi and Nehru.) They persuaded almost all the leading schools in Jaffna to teach Sinhala as a compulsory subject. As A E Jayasuriya observed, "At a time when the Sinhalese were prepared to do without Sinhala, the battle for Sinhala and Tamil was fought by Tamil leaders": see, D Nesiah, *Tamil Nationalism*, p. 12. Even after the trauma of Standardisation ("racial" quota) in relation to University admission beginning in 1971, and the Draft Constitution of 1972, the All Ceylon Tamil Conference declared, "Our children and our children's children should be able to say, with one voice, Lanka is our great motherland, and we are one people from shore to shore. We speak two noble languages, but with one voice" (Nesiah, p. 14).

I recall that when C. Suntheralingam of Vavuniya argued for a separate (Tamil) state in the early 1950s, he was indulgently laughed at by most Tamils who saw it as the eccentricity of a brilliant mind. In 1952, the Kankesuntharai parliamentary seat was contested by Chelvanayagam, as a member of the Federal Party. He was comfortably defeated by a U.N.P. candidate.

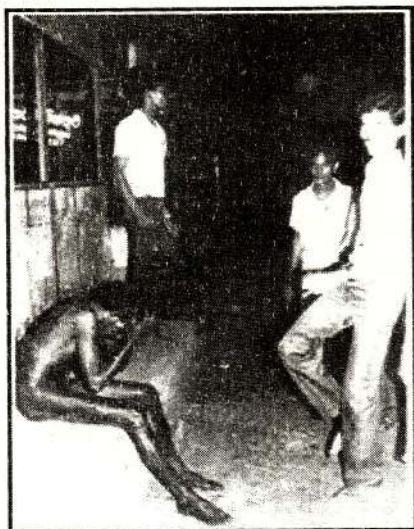
“Those were the days”?

Those were the days, one exclaims with nostalgia, but were they? Was this amity and “oneness” *pro tem* and superficial (that is, of the surface only)? The leadership drawn from the English-educated elite was soon to be replaced. Indeed, some from this elite (like S W R D Bandaranayake) reinvented themselves, taking on a more popular and profitable identity. It was a complete “make over”, changing religion, language and clothes; voice, tone and content. Do (unscrupulous and foolish) politicians create ethnic attitudes and feelings? It is all too easy for people to blame politicians, shifting responsibility away from themselves. To what extent do politicians “merely” exacerbate “racial” and religious feeling? To what extent do they reflect them? Do they create or pander to? Is it an interaction, the one worsening the other? What, in short, was the real state of inter-ethnic relations then? And so one must be cautious when reading statements such as the following: Sir Ponnampalam Ramanathan was elected to the state council in the 1912 election by the majority Sinhalese vote. The Ceylon National Congress established in 1919 was predominantly Sinhalese but Sir Ponnampalam Arunachalam was elected its first president.

Soon after the euphoria of independence, there began a pattern of using mob violence to achieve political ends, the “p” in “politics” in this instance standing for power; power implying domination; domination, in turn, the dominated. As Kumari Jayawardena notes (*op. cit.*), in 1883, the conflict was between Buddhists and Christians; in 1915, it was between Buddhists and Muslims; in the 1930s, the target was the Malayalis. At independence, citizenship and the vote were withdrawn from the Upcountry Tamil. Thereafter, it was the turn of Tamils in general. (In an informal conversation, a Sinhalese, unaware of my ethnic identity, told me that after the Tamils had been “fixed”, the Muslims would be taught a good lesson.) Seen in the context of this historical development, the pogrom of 1983 becomes less of a surprise: sometimes, historical understanding turns the incredible into the inevitable. On the lines of the distinction between “doing” and “being”, it can be said that the Tigers “did” (attacked), and the general Tamil population paid for “being”, simply for being Tamil. Tamils were killed most horribly by strangers, that is, by those who had no personal grievance against them: to be Tamil was sufficient crime and sin. In this hate and frenzy, even Tamils who had worked for the state were not exempt. In the long run,

collaboration does not buy favours, not even exemption. Tamil Police inspector Bastianpillai was a relentless hunter of the Tigers; he was warned by them and, when he failed to stop the hunt, murdered. Yet, in 1983, his widow and children were on the list, together with the other Tamils marked for death. They were Tamil and that was good enough reason: see, L. Piyadasa, Sri Lanka: *The Holocaust and After*, page 84.

Black July



“Black July” or “July '83” as it has come to be known (rather like the later shorthand, “9/11”) was not a spontaneous “riot” but a pogrom. It was planned, with voter-lists studied to identify Tamil homes, and the “security” (sic) forces providing transport. On 19 July, that is, five days before the incident in Jaffna claimed as the cause (and justification) of “Black July”, President J. R. Jayawardene issued an emergency order imposing press censorship. The Public Security Act permitted the security forces to bury or cremate bodies without post-mortem examination or judicial inquiry.

In the modern history of the Tamils of Sri Lanka, "Black July" is the most significant and painful event one cautiously adds, *to date*. (Addendum: My caution in adding "to date" is now justified. The plight of Tamils who were trapped between warring sides on an ever diminishing bit of land; the death and maiming of hundreds of civilians; the thousands of refugees - May 2009 - in squalid detention camps, children separated from parents, all traumatised and facing an uncertain future, exceeds, I think, the horror and suffering of 1983.)

On the part of the Sinhalese, the response is various, among them being that of suppression or repression, leading to a wished and willed amnesia. Even those who know prefer not to know. ("Suppression" was used by Sigmund Freud to describe a conscious mechanism intended to eliminate undesirable psychical content from consciousness. The Freudian difference between suppression and repression lies in the fact that the latter defence-mechanism is unconscious. I must add that I know Tamils who were personally caught up in 'Black July' and yet have "forgotten" the event. Perhaps, it is too painful and, in some ways, embarrassing? Perhaps, they want to put it aside and get on with their lives?) Other responses include that of minimisation ("It wasn't really that bad" see

D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke below) or self-justification, and a 'blame the victim' attitude. "It's their fault. They asked for it"; even to "They deserved what they got".

Minoli Salgado, in *Writing Sri Lanka*, quotes Professor D C R A Goonetilleke as stating that what was done to the Tamils in 1983 was "no Holocaust" (see, Salgado, Note 105, p. 179). There are no official statistics but the number of Tamils killed is placed between two and three thousand. It is therefore terminologically inaccurate to describe the pogrom as a holocaust, and Tamils who do so, moved by emotion, harm the case they attempt to make by over-stating it. A holocaust is determined by intention (extermination) and, following from that, also by number. Of course, one can quote Donne and say that any one's death diminishes us because we are (or ought to be) involved in humanity; one can claim that what makes for the heinous is not number but the nature of the action. Still Goonetilleke, though lacking in sympathy, is perhaps correct.

Why such hatred?

Michael Roberts in his writing on July '83 uses words such as “gristly” and “beastly”. Since what happened took place also in Colombo, there were several foreign, impartial (although horrified, unbelieving) witnesses. It was revolting in detail - pregnant women disembowelled; women gang-raped in public; whole families set alight alive - and distressing in effect. Almost every Sinhalese family known to me personally has a story to tell of help rendered or protection afforded to “terrorised” Tamils. But there was no sense of national revulsion, no collective protest; no public demand for inquiry, justice and compensation: see the Niebuhr article above. It was all blamed on a few unruly elements. In contrast, Germany has publicly, almost obsessively, accepted culpability for its actions during World War 11; paid compensation, released self-incriminating documents. As an Armenian said to Jewish writer, Yossi Klein Halevi, “You're lucky it was the Germans who killed you. They are a civilized people. They know how to apologize”: *The New York Review of Books*, 10 May 2007, p. 37. The government of Sri Lanka expressed no regret because it felt none. On the contrary, President Jayawardene said he was not worried about the

opinion of the Jaffna people. “The more you put pressure in the north, the happier the Sinhalese people will be here. Really, if I starve the Tamils out, the Sinhala people will be happy.” By way of contrast, *Hannah Arendt* admonished those of her fellow Jews who were “racist” and ready to terrorise the Palestinians: “Thou shall not kill, not even Arab women and children”. (See, Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, Yale University Press, 2004, p. 291.)

Focusing on the massacre that took place at Welikade prison on the 25th and 27th of July, fifty-three Tamils in state custody were murdered, the guards (ironic word here) having opened the cells and given the mob free access to the prisoners. Among this hapless group was “Kuttimani” of TELO, found guilty of murder committed in the course of a politically-motivated robbery. Asked by the court, as is customary before the death sentence is passed, if he had anything to say, Kuttimani replied that he wished to donate his eyes so that, one day, they would see an independent Tamil homeland. This unusual statement was widely publicised, and when the mob dragged him out, it is said they taunted, “Are these the eyes that wanted to see Tamil freedom?” gouged them out, and then killed him.

A character in Romesh Gunsekera's novel, *The Match*, asks, "How can they do it? What could make a person throw kerosene over another human being and set fire to him? Watch his skin crinkle and burn? How could they hear the screams, see the flames wrap around a writhing man, smell the burning flesh, and then do it again?" (London: Bloomsbury, 2006, p. 154). Basil Fernando wrote a poem, 'Yet another incident in July 1983', based on an incident witnessed by one of his Sinhalese lawyer friends at Narahenpita, close to the Labour Secretariat. A car carrying parents and their two children, aged about four and five, is stopped; Tamil identity is established, petrol poured over and the vehicle set alight. Then someone opens the car door and takes away the two children, crying and resisting. Suddenly, the father, already on fire, steps out of the car, bends down and takes his two children.

Not even

looking around as if executing a calculated
decision, he resolutely
re-entered the car.

Once inside, he closed the door
himself... I heard the noise
distinctly.

Michael Robers, from whose *Exploring Confrontation* (1994) the above is taken, comments that his interest is in the lucidity of the indictment expressed by that unknown Tamil father. His courage and “incisive clarity of comment has etched its imprint on my soul” (p. 322).

Returning to the dismissal by Professor D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke, what remains in Tamil memory and heart is not the number of those killed but the horrific nature of the attack. Tamils are puzzled at the intensity of the hatred and, following, the ready willingness to commit appalling atrocity. Tiger atrocities being post-1983, Tamils have asked, “What had we done to excite and deserve such intense and venomous animosity?” (In Coetzee's prize-winning novel, *Disgrace*, the daughter, victim of vicious gang-rape, asks her father, “But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them”.) In another work of his, Michael Roberts discusses various theories to explain the horrific violence which included the dismemberment of corpses. According to one possible explanation, the Tamil has come to represent the demon and, therefore, like the demon, must be tortured and mutilated; made afraid and brought under control. The maltreatment of the body (before, during or after death) has an effect on those related to the person: “In

effect, the anxieties of kinfolk will be multiplied not only in the immediate aftermath, but also throughout their life span because the cause of specific afflictions could be the wandering ancestor spirit of mutilated kin. In brief, the dismemberment of a body maximises the ripple of chaos... over a considerable span of time" (Roberts, *Sinhala Consciousness*, p. 152). The belief in demons and spirits takes us back to *The Mahavamsa*; to superstition and magic, to the belief in spells and exorcism which have penetrated, permeated and contaminated Buddhism. The placing of dead or dying bodies before the Buddha statue is a recursion to primitive times when some tribes offered human sacrifice to please and placate an atavistic and bloodthirsty god. One notes that, etymologically, the word "holocaust" comes from burnt offering, that is, sacrificial flesh offered to propitiate and please a god or spirit. The eponymous hero of Smollett's novel *Roderick Random* (Chapter 6) observes that it is those who have done you the greatest injustice who hate you the most

Narayan Swamy's study of the LTTE leader, *Inside An Elusive Mind*, states that prior to 1983 the Tigers were little known and had no popular base, not even in Jaffna. (Swamy is no supporter of the Tigers, and the book's cover describes his work as a

profile of the world's "most ruthless" leader.) Tiger numbers prior to 1983 have been variously placed between twenty and thirty; at a maximum below fifty. All this changed after and more importantly, because of that fateful year, a fact that must be borne in mind if one is to make sense of subsequent development, of the violence and appalling human tragedy.

Since there is no conscription in Sri Lanka, the children of the upper and middle classes are not found in the armed forces and, if they are, serve in the relative safety of the higher ranks. The soldiers who die are usually from rural areas, obscure family, and attract little public attention. The majority of the Sinhalese population is untouched, unaffected and gets on with its normal life. The simple but brutal fact is that the battleground being in the North and the East of Sri Lanka, the rest of the Island enjoys or, if poor, endures, a normal existence. The exception is when a terrorist attack takes place, causing death, injury, damage - or the annoyance of having the watching of the cricket-cup final on public television screens disrupted, as happened in April 2007. It is well to remind ourselves that, as already mentioned, states have killed far more, and wrought far greater destruction, than any terrorist group, however 'dramatic' the actions of the latter.

By way of drawing attention to yet another “not-fitting” piece of the jigsaw puzzle, I offer quotations from different articles. “The battle-scarred Jaffna peninsula... The war-ravaged northern peninsula... Jaffna has borne the brunt of a war that has killed 64,000 people” (*Gulf Daily News*, Bahrain, 15 March 2002, p. 16). Jaffna is desolate. There is no sustainable education system, and public transport is in “shambles”. “Magnificent family homes have been converted into mini bases for the security forces”. A lack of water and daily power-cuts create a sense of hopelessness amidst the shattered houses. “What is taken for granted in the south is a luxury in the north” (Colombo: *The Sunday Leader*, 17 March 2002, p. 11. Italics added). The following is taken from Jehan Perera's article in the *Daily Mirror* (Colombo, 3 April 2007):

There are in fact two societies in Sri Lanka: “the much larger one outside the north and east which is relatively prosperous and free, while the other is ruined and terrorised” (emphasis added). The release of the Central Bank's annual report for 2006, which shows a 7.7 growth figure demonstrates the resilience of the Sri Lankan economy. The economy of the vast majority of the people has been relatively unaffected. With the exception of the tourism sector, the life and economy of people outside the

north and east has been barely touched by the violence of the ethnic conflict. There is “a disregard for those who are suffering and are being left behind in the north and east. By and large, violence and dislocation is contained [confined to?] in the north and east.” There is gross violation of property rights, and people are “driven repeatedly from their homes to live in squalor in refugee camps” without hope.

Mr Kathirgamathamby of the White Pigeons Institute, reporting on the North (24 September 2007), describes a tragic situation. People do not attend religious festivals because of the curfew and the extreme feeling of insecurity created by the “security” (sic) forces. Economic deprivation, the stress of daily life and the trauma of war have created not only beggars, but mentally disturbed beggars. Professor Jayadeva Uyangoda (*Beyond the Talks: Towards Transformative Peace in Sri Lanka*, p. 20), goes so far as to describe the Northern and Eastern provinces as “one of the most ruined regions in the world” (italics added).

Recapitulation

Let me recapitulate. Inequality was abruptly imposed, followed by peaceful, Gandhian-model, Tamil protest which was met by increasing violence, culminating in the “bestial” and shameful pogrom of 1983. At that time, the Tigers were a very small

band, but reaction a mixture of anger and the loss of hope in redress through Parliament - drove thousands of Tamils into their ranks. The conflict is asymmetrical in the extreme, with one side having jet fighters and helicopters in the air, and a comparatively massive number of soldiers on the ground. The North and East are devastated, sections of the population turned into refugees, traumatised, and harassed. The rest of the Island, by and large, enjoys normality. In this context, the Tigers occasionally succeed in making the South realize that they too have a price to pay, albeit much, much smaller. A little bit of the daily reality in the North and East is intruded into the South so that the "problem" will be addressed. This explains the resort to "terrorism" and I repeat, to understand is not to condone; is not to be without deep regret. Terrorism, whether perpetrated by the state or dissident group, causes human tragedy, and is morally repugnant.

During the American war of independence, Lord Chatham (also known as William Pitt, the elder) said that if he had been an American, he would have fought the British. The Sinhalese must honestly ask themselves, "If I were a Tamil, what would my options be? How would I react?" As I wrote earlier, each group is trapped in its own experience, and

resulting perspective, attitude and feeling. African American Claude McKay (1889-1948), in his poem 'The Negro's Tragedy', observes that no white man could write his book, tell his story, because the daily experiences of the two are so very different. Towards the end of the 1950s, John Howard Griffin, an American "White", changed himself and travelled, including the notorious (in "racial" terms), Southern states of the USA, as a Black. He published his experience in a work, *Black Like Me*, that became a bestseller. Apart from actually visiting the North, perhaps some Sinhalese, preferably female, journalist will take on a temporary Tamil identity in Colombo or elsewhere in the South, and investigate the commonplace, everyday, experience ethnic identity can visit on the individual? What does it mean to be a Tamil in today's Sri Lanka? As Human Rights Watch reported (New York, 6 August 2007), the government has given the green light to the security forces to wage a dirty war against the Tamil civilian population. The Minority Rights Group International's Report, "Minorities under Threat", moves the Tamils of Sri Lanka from forty-ninth endangered place in the year 2006 to fourteenth in the year 2007.

In a personal communication to me (April 2007), Fr Paul Caspersz of Satyodaya, Kandy,

remarked that both the JVP at the time they staged their uprising and the LTTE had real and legitimate grievance: what was unfortunate was the path chosen in the pursuit of redress. Immediately after "July '83", there was much sympathy for the Tamils, with international condemnation of what happened - remarkably absent within the Island - and the opening of immigration doors. However, the Tigers by their action have lost the moral high-ground, dissipated goodwill, forfeited much support. They are now proscribed in several countries and, generally, are associated not with freedom but with terrorism.

Dissent is not tolerated, and competing groups have been eliminated without hesitation or mercy. Intolerance, brutality and ruthlessness were directed as much against fellow Tamils, as against the "enemy" Sinhalese. Victor Ivan (*Montage*, May 2007), states, "Great injustice has been done to the Tamil people by the Sinhala people" but *Tiger conduct was such it "prevented the Sinhala people from recognizing their own wrongs"*. This is a perceptive observation, one that cannot be denied.

The Tamils find themselves caught between Sinhalese chauvinism, and Tiger tyranny - or, as someone here in Berlin said to me, they are trapped on a branch on fire at both ends. Those who can,

jump off into exile, and life in a foreign country. Some may argue that the Tigers, fighting against huge odds, must maintain "discipline" and an iron control at all cost but, again, an explanation does not necessarily lead to exculpation. Whether perpetrated by a dissent group or the state, "at all cost" is humanely and morally unacceptable.

The conviction, particularly among Sinhalese circles, is that if the Tigers are removed from the equation, then everyone in the Island (not just the Sinhalese) will enjoy peace and harmony. The Tigers, their coming into being and existence (once the consequence of injustice and violence) are now the cause of bloody and destructive conflict. And so, like Cato's oft-repeated cry, *Carthago delenda est*, the current mantra is "The Tigers must be defeated, if not destroyed."

A history of disappointment

But does History give confidence to the Tamil community that, once the Tigers have been eliminated or neutralised, equality, justice and inclusion will prevail? Where within Sri Lanka's history does one start to answer this question?

In 1919, Ponnambalam Arunachalam, on behalf of the Tamils, and James Pieris and E. J. Samarawickrama on behalf of the Sinhalese, agreed to provide a seat in the legislature for the Tamils of

the Western Province. When in 1922 it came before the Ceylon National Congress for ratification (before it was forwarded to Whitehall), it was successfully opposed by H. J. C. Pereira and others. That was the end of the 1919 pact.

There followed "the Mahendra Pact" in 1925. C. E. Corea, accompanied by others such as George E. de Silva and P. de S. Kularatne, entered into a pact in Jaffna with a Tamil delegation. The meeting took place at the residence (known as 'Mahendra') of Waithilingam Duraiswamy, and so the agreement is known as the Mahendra Pact. The proposals agreed to at this meeting were placed before a general session of the Congress (Kandy, 1925) but ratification was postponed to the next meeting. This took place in Galle (1926), but the proposals were rejected.

G G Ponnambalam's demand of "Fifty Fifty" was deliberately misrepresented and ridiculed. "Ponna" saw that in a multiethnic country, the majority would always vote on "racial" lines, resulting not in democracy but majoritarian dictatorship. (In a true democracy, there is no fixed voting bloc, and the electorate changes support for a party according to the issues that are considered important. It is not a firm and predictable allegiance based on "tribal" lines.) I quote words from the

speech made by G. G. Ponnambalam in the State Council (1939) on the Reform Despatch of Sir Andrew Caldecott:

"The demand, as far I as I am aware, of the minorities of this country has been for balanced representation, for representation on the basis that no single community should be in a position to out-vote a combination of all the other communities in the Island."

"Thirty-four Members belonging to one community united by a common language, united in most cases by a common religion [...] as opposed to another 34 Members, consisting of a number of thoroughly heterogeneous groups - of Tamils, Indians, Muslims, Burghers, and Europeans and Malays [...] I ask you, 'What have the Sinhalese to fear'?"

Section 29 of the Soulbury Constitution under which Ceylon was granted independence in 1948 clearly reads that no law shall "confer on persons of any community or religion any privilege or advantage which is not conferred on persons of other communities or religions". This all-important safeguard was omitted in the Republican constitution of 1972. In other words, it was made lawful to discriminate, to deny equality and, therefore, justice - and there was no outcry on the

part of the majority community against this reactionary, retrograde, move. (Those who wish a more detailed listing of broken promises and disappointed hope could read the article by one Stylo in the Morning Leader, Colombo, 27 December 2006.)

The best-known of agreements and pacts is that between S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and S.J.V. Chelvanayagam, already referred to. Caught between Tamil protest and Sinhalese vehemence, "Banda" thought the solution would be to allow the mob a few days in which to "terrorise" and cow the Tamils into acquiescence, resulting in the 1958 anti-Tamil riot.

There then followed the Senanayake-Chelvanayagam pact of 1965, but it too was abandoned, left unimplemented. It must be made clear, and stressed, that these pacts were not broken by Tamil action.

Given these facts, given this past record, what confidence can the Tamils have that justice will prevail if the Tigers are eliminated? What is pondered by Tamils is, "If, despite the Tigers, the majority of Sinhalese are unwilling to extend justice and equality, why should they when the Tamils are defenseless? Will it not be yet again a case of "Woe to the vanquished"? When I asked a Sinhalese friend

what he thought would be the fate of the Tamils if and when the Tigers are defeated, he answered without hesitation, "Subordination". The issue of 11 January 2005 of the *Asian Times*, from which I have already quoted, states: "Without the protective role of the LTTE, the Tamils would be at the mercy of the Sinhalese chauvinists." Tamils have pointed out that, were a Sinhalese group to take up arms against the government, the latter would not bomb Sinhalese villages on the excuse that some combatants are also there in the vicinity, take over property, destroy schools and the infrastructure. Ostensibly a war against the Tigers only, the Sri Lankan Tamil population, whether in the North, East, South or West, pays in one form or another. And yet Tiger's conduct has been such that even some Tamils see them as part of the problem, and not of the solution: a tragic tale and dilemma.

Paulo Freire in his classic work, *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed* (1970) states that those who are not fully free cannot be fully human. The LTTE leader stated:

"We are not chauvinists. Neither are we lovers of violence enchanted with war. We do not regard the Sinhalese people as our opponents or as our enemies. We accord a place of dignity for the culture and heritage of the Sinhalese people. We have no desire to interfere in any way with the national life of

the Sinhalese people or with their freedom and independence. All we desire is to live in our historic homeland in peace, freedom and with dignity”.

However, human history, over time and the world over, shows that justice and freedom are never gifted, voluntarily, out of altruism. They are demanded, dearly paid for, extracted and won. Writing about Kosovo, Tim Judah observes that though people say violence doesn't pay, experience shows the opposite. “Indeed, it was the passive resistance of Kosovo Albanians to Serbian rule that failed to produce results.” This failure finally drove the Albanians to resort to force (*The New York Review of Books*, 10 June 2004, p. 36) and, one may add, “force” means violence. Going back much further in time, African American Frederick Douglass, during a speech in 1857, said: “The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of struggle... If there is no struggle, there is no progress... *Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will*”. (See, Robert Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, p. 183. Emphasis added.) A prominent 20th century political theorist wrote it would be “ludicrous to believe that a defenseless people has nothing but friends, and it would be a deranged calculation to

suppose that the enemy could perhaps be touched by the absence of a resistance". (Carl Schmitt, *The Concept Of The Political*, p.53). Recent Sri Lankan history validates this statement. Without oppositional power, there is no need for compromise; without the need for compromise, no incentive to seek a negotiated settlement leading to peace. (Negative peace is the absence of war; real peace is the presence of harmony, resulting from equality and justice.) To demand disarmament before a settlement is reached and implementation actually begun, is to be incredibly innocent, ahistorical or, worse, dishonest and Machiavellian.

Decades ago, the Tamils rejected federalism: as already stated, Chelvanayagam contested a seat in Jaffna as a Federal Party candidate and lost to the UNP. Violence and an adamant refusal to accept equality made the Tamils change their mind and see federalism as the solution. When that was opposed, and mob "terror" unleashed, they turned to separatism

Ever since independence successive Sri Lankan governments have done everything in their power, from state-sponsored racism to state-sponsored pogroms, to render the Tamils a separate people, and inferior and then cried out against that separatism when the Tamils embraced it to carve out their dignity and future.

("Sri Lanka: Racism and the Authoritarian State", *Race & Class*, London, Vol XXV1, No 1, Summer 1984.)

By the late 1970s, after a succession of failed effort in parliament; after a succession of riots, culminating in the horrific pogrom of 1983, it seemed to the Tamils that the parting of the ways had been reached. So too, the thirteen American "colonies" declared (4 July 1776) that in the course of human events, it sometimes becomes necessary for a people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another. I quote (not always verbatim) extracts from that famous Declaration:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. Government is instituted among humankind to secure [not to deny] these rights. The power of government is just because [and only when] it is derived from the consent of the governed. When a government becomes destructive, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it. But governments "should not be changed for light and transient causes". That is why people continue to suffer "while evils are sufferable". "But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same

Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government.

Some voices do speak beyond the “racial”, the political and the military to fundamental human rights, but they are not heeded. Few urge justice and compassion, inclusion, and the according to others what one has arrogated to oneself. It is unfortunate that while Sri Lanka has had (and has) hate-filled “racists” like Dharmapala (Buddhist monk) and Wijewardena (layman), it has not produced a Mahatma Gandhi, a Martin Luther King, a Mandela or Desmond Tutu. The Mahatma (“great of soul”), though himself a Hindu, opposed Hindu lack of generosity and intransigence. Similarly, during the Rivonia trial of 1963, Nelson Mandela said, “I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination”.

Ironically, the “LTTE's conditions of existence are not supplied by the LTTE itself but by others, including those who claim to oppose separatism and terrorism” (Dayan Jayatilleka, in *Remembering Kethesh Loganathan*, Sri Lanka Democracy Forum, March 2007, p. 27). In other words, opposition is best removed by moving beyond ethnic and party politics; by beyond dealing with underlying causes,

rather than with symptoms. The past has determined the present, but one must not fatalistically allow the present to fashion the future. In this context, borrowing words from Karl Marx, the challenge; indeed, the responsibility, is not only to understand history but to alter the (future) course of history. We are responsible for our political karma. The Tamils turned away from a monolithic state to federalism; failing in that, and with continued and increasing suffering, particularly in 1983, some Tamils to separation. However, the process can be retraced, if confidence, trust and hope are created. And it is not a matter of pacts and agreements, but their clearly evident implementation; not merely the letter of the law, but its spirit. Tamils must be shown unequivocally that there is no need for an armed group to defend their rights.

In the shameless and irresponsible pursuit of party politics; that is, of personal and group power, federalism in the 1950s was made into a veritable bogey, an ogre about to devour the Island. A populace characterised by credulity and emotion (and therefore also by volatility) was easily convinced and "excited", fear and passion aroused. The people, unknowing and trusting, are easily led into falsity and, resulting from that, deep-seated

fear. The United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Russia, India, Pakistan, Malaysia to name but a few - have a federal structure, but we do not see them as divided nations. The horizons of the Sri Lankan populace is deliberately kept narrow; focussed, intensely and obsessively, inward. As with the term "terrorism" discussed earlier, "federalism" is used without definition and clarification. It must be added that, unfortunately, the contrast is between federal and unitary structure, mistakenly suggesting in the minds of the people that federalism destroys unity.

In viewing the present, one must also recall the past, and its betrayed possibilities. I quote, again not verbatim (except when within quotation marks) from the memoir of Lee Kuan Yew:

Ceylon was Britain's model Commonwealth country. It had a relatively good standard of education, a civil service largely of locals, and experience in representative government. "When Ceylon gained independence in 1948, it was the classic model of gradual evolution to independence. Alas it did not work out. I watched a promising country go to waste (emphasis added). One-man-one-vote did not solve a basic problem: the Sinhalese could always outvote the Tamils. The greatest mistake

Jayawardene made was over the distribution of reclaimed land in the dry zone: it was not shared with the Tamils "who had been the farmers of this dry zone. "Dispossessed and squeezed, they launched the Tamil Tigers."

Ranasinghe Premadasa was a Sinhalese chauvinist. I met him on several occasions. "I argued that his objective must be to deprive the terrorists of popular support by offering the Tamils autonomy", but he was convinced he could destroy the Tigers. Under his successor, Chandrika Kumaratunga, the war continues.

Ceylon's ancient name was Serendip, and serendipity means an accidental, but happy, discovery. The Island is "now the epitome of conflict, pain, sorrow and hopelessness."

Lee Kuan Yew's comment should provoke clear and honest self-examination on all sides, and a determination to create and bequeath a happier future. Pavlov's experiment with dogs conditioned to salivate is general currency, but what is less known and noted is that if 'reinforcement' is stopped, then the effects of the 'conditioning' wears off and History offers numerous examples of people led to see yesterday's foe as today's friend. Turning from Sri Lanka to India, that country neutralised the

separatist tendency in Tamil Nadu, not by armed might and counter-productive violence, but by inclusion and incorporation; by convincing the people that they had a share, and a say, at the centre. Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, resulting in anti-Sikh riots that left hundreds dead: today, the Prime Minister is a Sikh. The leader of the party in power, Congress, is an Italian, and the President, despite tensions with Moslem Pakistan, is Dr Abdul Kalam. In stark and telling contrast, it is unthinkable that in post-independence Sri Lanka, a Christian, even if she or he is a Sinhalese, becomes President (hence the politic and political-religious conversion of Bandaranaike and Jayawardena to Buddhism) and much less, a Tamil, even if s/he were a Buddhist, whether by birth or 'conversion'.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka ever since 1948 has deteriorated in political and moral terms: what counts is not cricket, but the ethnic conflict and the suffering it brings; corruption and crime. Corruption, having infected the highest levels, has seeped down, so that the public takes it for granted, accepts it as a part of life, like the weather, and are no longer shocked and outraged. On Independence Day, the minorities and the poor, being excluded, have more cause to mourn

than to celebrate. And yet (with acknowledgement to Martin Luther King), there is the dream that, one day, people will not be reacted to on grounds of ethnicity "but by the content of their character"; that one day, the children of different groups "will be able to join hands" and walk together; that one day, the Island rise up and live out the true meaning of that belief and assertion: All are created equal, and should be permitted, indeed, enabled, to live in equality. As Chelvanayagam said in Parliament in the course of a debate (1 March 1951), "Let us have one nation, but that 'one nation' must be based on the principle of evolving a harmonious unit, not on the principle of destroying the smaller units. [But] you are proceeding on the principle of destroying, hurting, the smaller units. How can there be one nation on that basis?"

Sri Lanka's present is marked by irrationality, hatred and violence; the future, uncertain. I offer no solution but have merely sketched some of the problems, including what I term the Tamil dilemma and, in that way, tried to make a contribution to awareness. The country is in a state of acute cultural crisis "cultural" in its broad sense, as a way of life, and so including the political, religious and ethical. It is said that the first and essential step in an addict's effort at redeeming himself is to acknowledge and

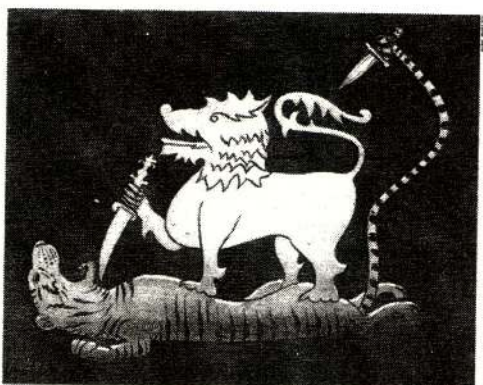
accept that he has fallen into a pit. Similarly, the Island must give up denial and empty “pride”, and admit that it is in a sorry state, a state all the more tragic because, unlike the tsunami, it is self-created.

Sri Lanka has the highest level of literacy (91%) in the South Asian region; it boasts many who are highly qualified but the people are not educated, that is, not led outward. We are inwardly focused and obsessed. Mired in the past, we take myth for fact; distort Buddhism; believe in essentialism and “race”, exclusivity and superiority; in Aryanism and divine election. There is little desire to recognise what is common and shared, while celebrating even encouraging - variety and equality. Posthumous restitution is not practical, and perhaps it is too late for the present, but for the sake of the children of the present and future, the long reign of anomie must be ended.

Addendum

On 18 May 2009, it was officially reported that Velupillai Prabhakaran (b. 26 November 1954), leader of the Tamil Tigers had been killed. The war was declared over, amidst scenes of euphoria and jubilation. Responding to President Rajapakse's

claim that the final stages of the war against the Tigers was an “unprecedented humanitarian operation”, Jonathan Steele commented that, as a euphemism for war, the phrase was hard to beat. Steele went on to ask whether the state was planning to send Sinhalese settlers into the traditional Tamil homeland. Would it pepper the area with army camps and checkpoints, like the occupied West Bank? A long succession of Colombo governments has failed to address the Tamil minority's legitimate complaints. To write the Tigers off as terrorists or the war against them as “just” distorts the facts. While also resorting to frequent acts of terror against civilians as well as assassinations of politicians, they twice fought the government army to a standstill in conventional war because they had a case which many (not all) Tamils agreed with. If Rajapakse treats Tamils as a conquered enemy, he will sow the seeds for new militancy in the generation to come. (See: 'After the Tigers' defeat, the abuse of Tamils must stop' by Jonathan Steele, *The Guardian*, London, 19 May 2009, page 24.)



A government that depends only on force is neither legitimate nor moral (Rousseau, *The Social Contract*). I conclude by repeating the words of Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranayake (already quoted):

At this juncture I said to myself: "Buddhism means so much to me. Let me be dictated to only by the tenets of Buddhism."

I am happy to say a solution was immediately forthcoming.

One recalls too that the Buddha turned *Hariti* (goddess of anomie and destruction) into the goddess of peace and harmony by making her realize the suffering and tragedy she causes. So may it come to pass in Sri Lanka.

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Notes

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