
‘COVERING UP’: CREEPING TALIBANIZATION?

Cat’s Eye has noticed an increasing emphasis on a particular form of morality in the guise of a postwar resurgence of society. This is evident on the part of all sectors of society – not only by those in power but religious leaders, key officials in the police force and leaders of educational institutions, as well as the media. At times, the rhetoric is transformed into action. Take, for example, the continuing censorship of adult-only films (obviously there are some adults/ censors who are more adult than others who have the dubious honor of taking these decisions); images of alcohol consumption, affection and human sexuality in TV program; and the archaic prohibition on women purchasing alcohol (Why discriminate? Why not prohibit men too?).

A dress code is also imposed on women, especially in educational institutions. Apparently, mothers have to wear sari to enter the premises of their children’s schools and mothers who wear even long skirt and blouse are kept out of bounds. Thus, the country’s ‘return to normalcy’ after the war is reliant on a discourse of blaming and shaming, advocacy of self-restraint and responsibility, as well as moral authoritarianism in imposing codes of conformity and so called respectability.

Back to the Kitchen

This ‘moral’ turn, we are told, is towards building a new, postwar Sri Lanka. It has been a common experience of many communities at war that once the armed struggle is over, there is a scramble to return its women, in particular, to traditional roles. The current peacetime emphasis in the south of the country on the morality and respectability of women is not far in spirit from the diktats of the LTTE. In 2002, during the peace process, the LTTE issued a leaflet proclaiming its ‘ten commandments’ on Tamil women in the East. In the leaflet the LTTE declared that Tamil women should not ‘spoil the dignity of Tamil culture’ by ‘behaving in an anti-Tamil manner.’ They were ordered not to wear housecoats when coming out of their houses onto the road. Married women were asked to wear national dress (presumably sari). Amongst the ‘anti-Tamil’ behaviour proscribed was the consumption of alcohol. Women were warned against ‘mixing with men on beaches after losing their senses with alcohol and drugs.’ The leaflet ended with a

veiled threat: ‘Freedom of women is in the hands of women, and they should think realistically rather than falling into the hands of anti-Tamil movements, which indeed will bring an end to their life and community as well.’

At the time (in 2002) Cat’s Eye wrote strongly condemning the LTTE for its threatening moral edicts selectively directed at women. Cat’s Eye stated that these diktats ‘send a critical message to all those who are concerned about the implementation of the Ceasefire Agreement with respect for human rights and human dignity.’ Cat’s Eye demanded that ‘All attempts to control dissent and individuality, all attempts to impose rules and regulations that deny people the right to choose, all attempts to once more oppress and discriminate against members of marginalized communities, whether they be women, children, religious or ethnic minorities... must be fought against rigorously.’

Thus, in the aftermath of war and political upheaval, diehard traditionalists of all countries use the occasion to whip up cultural frenzy to advocate a return to the past. Local society has always had its share of such old (and young) fogeys with their *bamunu matha*-namely, ‘brahmin’ or obscurantist patriarchal views as reflected in Sinhala and Tamil proverbs against women (‘a woman’s brain cannot think beyond the handle of a spoon’). Even our women ministers often speak of a *nisi thana* (appropriate place) for women which is not far from Hitler’s prescription for women – children, kitchen and church (*kinder, küche, kirke*). In every era and in every country there has been resistance to such attempts to undercut the political, economic and social gains that women have made over the years.

Defining Tamil Culture

In the past few months, following the end of the armed conflict between the government and the LTTE, concern has been voiced about the ‘deterioration’ of Tamil culture during the conflict, mainly due to the actions of the LTTE. Most often this ‘degradation’ of Tamil culture is illustrated by examples of the behavior of women who have acted in ways construed to be contrary to accepted norms. These statements however are not made by members of the Tamil community but by state actors of the majority community.

For instance, an official of the Sri Lankan army is quoted as saying that lessons on the traditions and culture of the Tamil community will be part of the curriculum of the rehabilitation process of ex-LTTE cadres. Does this mean that these lessons will represent Tamil culture and tradition as understood by members of the majority community? What will be incorporated in these lessons? Will it be only Bharata Natyam, cookery, and veena lessons? Who then has the power to define culture?

Defining Buddhist Culture

A Sinhala newspaper recently carried an interview with a Buddhist monk who, supposedly, was speaking on Buddhist values and material ones. Curiously, the article headline read, 'Even 60 year old women come to temple dressed like sixteen year olds' (*Hota pannath, dabbasaya kella vage pannolata enava*). The article further quoted the priest as noting, disapprovingly of a new breed of women devotees (*upasaka palenthiya*) who come to temple with hairstyles (hair piled on top of the head), with painted lips, looking very 'mod'. Not surprisingly, given the current thinking on culture and morality as being the sole responsibility of women, there is no mention of a dress code for men. In fact, no mention of men at all. It seems that whether it is in the field of religion, politics or education, women's dress and personal relationships take centre stage for vilification. Take the sexual nature of the debates and circulating internet images around the recent entry of a young actress into the political field in the South in order to denigrate her. They point to a society reluctant to acknowledge women as persons who can engage with any section of society in their own right, and permit only women who conform to the notion of the respectable (*Sinkala kala kumbava*) as fit to be in positions of responsibility and the public realm.

Covering Up

While the moral rhetoric about discipline and respectability which women are singled out to embody has risen to a high pitch, the reality is that in every sphere violence, authoritarianism and sexism are condoned. The recent comments of a senior government minister who observed that there are now laws that restrain men especially with regard to domestic violence is a case in point. The politician told/comforted the men around him by saying, 'you can hit your wife, but don't hit to hurt.' The inter/intra political violence by candidates at elections - the nasty 'boy's fights' in the south in which the offices of political opponents have been smashed and looted-is another example. So far, we have not heard public condemnation of this sort of behaviour from political, religious or educational leaders.

In a country where the rule of law is under stress, where violence, corruption, crime and sexual harassment of women appears to be at an all-time-high, focusing on women's dress and behaviour is absurd and hypocritical. So what is the real function of this moral address to women? Is it a literal and metaphorical cover-up of what is actually happening in society? If we want to build a true democracy in the aftermath of war, public officials, community and religious leaders as well as we citizens should be focusing on what is really wrong with our society. The denial of freedom of speech/expression - of which access to art, film, forms of dress are a part-goes against the basis of any democratic society. Intolerance of any kind, abuse of the rule of law, use of violence and corruption to get ahead, and archaic attitudes to women, must be highlighted and condemned. Should women lose the civil and political rights that acknowledge their capabilities as professionals/workers (won through hard struggle) to some untraded medieval attitudes? Are we on the road to cultural Talibanization? ■

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