
FROZEN TEARS

Robert Simpson

Frozen Tears: Political Violence, Women, Children and Problems of Trauma in Southern Sri Lanka by Indika Bulankulame.
Rs. 350.00.

In the late 1980s Sri Lanka experienced a conflict in which the legitimacy of the state was fundamentally challenged by a widespread insurrection in the South and Central region of the Island. The result was a relatively short but intense paroxysm of violence and civil disruption in which the government of the day responded with maximum force to put down and disperse the activities of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna [JVP]. Many perished in the widespread and seemingly indiscriminate violence that ensued. *Frozen Tears* is essentially about the longer-term consequences of this violence and takes as its focus those who survived those dark days; those whose lives were irreversibly transformed by events of unspeakable horror and the loss of close friends and relatives. As one might expect the survivors in question are typically women who lost their husbands, sons and brothers and children who lost their fathers.

One of Bulankulame's central contentions is that in the eagerness to 'move on', rebuild and forget, the deeply debilitating effects of the trauma experienced by this group is suppressed, over-ridden and lost. She addresses this issue squarely and offers an important service in the bigger project of bringing to light what it means in social and cultural terms to have survived violence of this order. Through the simple medium of relating and analysing stories told by those who were left behind when the unrest subsided, she describes the struggle to reconcile personal grief and suffering with the ongoing difficulties of practical social existence. The work thus touches on themes such as trauma, widowhood, being a single parent, bereavement and the role of kinship support. The picture that emerges is a tragic one in which these women and their children seem to have tumbled into something of a social void and a sense of victimhood from which attitudes of family and the wider society do little to help them escape. The early parts of the book describe and analyse this condition of rupture and disengagement from a variety of feminist and post-structuralist perspectives.

The second part of the book turns to the question of how attempts are made to address the personal and social consequences of a violent bereavement. Here the book turns to a potentially much

bigger canvass in that it considers the role of religion as a coping mechanism and how an indigenous repertoire of therapeutic techniques relates to interventions drawn from a western-originated one made up of psycho-social techniques such as post-traumatic stress counselling. In Sri Lanka, there is a range of local idioms through which suffering might be made sense of. These extend from the rather abstract accounting for suffering offered by Buddhism in which present conditions are attributed to actions believed to have been taken in previous lives, through to the more immediate work of exorcists and diviners who can identify a rather more personal and immediate nexus of cause and effect. The interesting and important question that Bulankulame poses is how western and local systems knit together, or rather fail to knit together, in providing solace for those afflicted by the traumas. What is the relationship between a consultation with an oracle and a trip to a Family Rehabilitation Centre for counselling? The kind of relationship she envisages is one in which the local forms provide the most powerful idioms for making sense of suffering yet the formal psycho-social interventions are the ones with resources and state legitimacy. The position she takes, and about which it would have been good to hear much more, is that western-trained psychologists and psychiatrists should know more about indigenous modes of dealing with distress and trauma and need to incorporate these into their practice.

The penultimate chapter of the book deals with 'The Truth Commissions as a Viable Healing Mechanism?'. The conclusion is a rather depressing one in that despite the good intentions behind their endeavour the Truth Commissions have, in the author's estimation, largely failed to ameliorate the suffering of victims to any great extent. Setting levels of compensation emerged as the primary function of the exercise with the quest for justice coming a poor second. Healing seems to have hardly figured at all in the mountains of testimony that the hearings generated.

There is clearly much work to be done in understanding and easing the suffering of those who were caught up in the political violence of the 1980s and indeed in the decade before that. This monograph marks a small but important attempt to understand the longer term and deeply personal consequences of political violence in Sri Lanka and maybe, somewhere in the future, it will help to unfreeze the tears which remain unable to flow and highlight the 'institutional amnesia' which currently perpetuates this state of affairs. ■

Dr. Robert Simpson is Senior Lecturer University of Durham, United Kingdom