

NOTES AND COMMENTS

A Cross Across Dambulla: Religious Intolerance?

It is more than a footnote to the Kandalama Sathyagraha of July 12. It is also a telling statement of the extent to which the Premadasa regime, when cornered, would seize on narrow religionism to create discord among its political opponents.

We are referring to the new campaign launched by the Lake House, a key propagandist centre of the Premadasa administration, to mobilize Buddhist opinion against the display of a cross near Dambulla temple by a group of Catholic nuns who participated in the protest. Statements attributed to a number of Buddhist monks loyal to the regime have been published in the Lake House press in order to orchestrate a particular concern: a pre-eminent place of Buddhist worship is desecrated by prominently displaying a Christian cross. 'Will Catholics allow Buddhists to place a Buddha statue at a Church?' is the recurrent question raised in the front page reports of the *Daily News*. Of course, the *Daily News* scribes are smart enough not to blame the Catholic church group that went to Dambulla carrying the cross; they are accusing the organizers of the protest of being insensitive to Buddhist sentiments.

All this, indeed, contradicts the public image of the administration which Mr. Premadasa himself and some of his recently converted propagandists have been projecting. Ethnic and religious tolerance is claimed to be the primary virtue that distinguishes Mr. Premadasa from all his predecessors and even from his contemporary opponents. Political expediency, it seems, knows no virtues.

Meanwhile, the readers of the *Island* of July 23 were treated to a rare piece of sober editorialising. Calling the Lake House press campaign on the cross across Dambulla "thoroughly obnoxious", the *Island* editorial warned of possible consequences "so tragic for religious harmony in the country." It finally called on Lake House to halt its "atavistic and tribal game of religious hate."

Tribalism, indeed, is not a new game for the Upali group of newspapers either, particularly for *Divayina*. The latter is perhaps the main propaganda organ of all Sinhalese racist and militaristic forces. Of late, the *Island* too has dropped its 'liberal' clothes, becoming a significant voice of Sinhalese 'tribalism.' One may even go to the extent of describing the

racist propaganda of *Divayina* as abusive of the freedom of expression in a manner designed to incite ethnic hatred and bigotry.

The Right to Hold and Express Political Opinions

Mr. Dayan Jayatilleke, who was once described (not in jest) by the editor of the *Economic Review* as one of the few original political thinkers in Sri Lanka, has ultimately found, in his own name and in the name of his alleged alter-ego Anuruddha Tilakasiri, a worthy opponent, namely Mr. Junius Jayewardene, President of Sri Lanka from 1978 to 1988. How many years had Mr. Jayatilleke to wait for a deserving adversary to come forward to challenge him in public? How many hundreds of newspaper columns had he wasted to reach this moment of glory?

There are many watching this impending duel with a great deal of delight, gloating over the possible downfall of a columnist who once appeared invincible. Even though some of us have been the victims of Tilakasiri's unchecked malice, we cannot share in this gloating. We are instead seriously concerned with a principle that is at stake: the freedom to express political opinions.

Mr. Jayewardene's lawyers are of the view that Mr. Jayatilleke, writing under the *nom-de-plume* Anuruddha Tilakasiri, has made false and malicious statements about their client thereby causing irreparable damage to the ex-President's reputation and the high esteem he was presumed to have enjoyed. Reports, though unconfirmed, have it that Mr. Dayan Jayatilleke would not retract, but fight it out.

As a columnist, Anuruddha Tilakasiri has been wielding a particularly nasty pen in a manner which can only be described as vindictive and unashamedly propagandist. Nonetheless, what Mr. Jayewardene appears to be challenging is the right of a columnist, or even of a citizen, to make politically-based comments on his past actions. Mr. Jayewardene was after all the President of the Republic which experienced a multiple trauma during the ten years of his rule. Mr. Jayewardene, or, even for that matter his successor, may want to avoid any political or moral culpability for all that went wrong. Or may be there is a compelling need to re-write history, to erase memories in order to construct new ones, and to be beatified in



(auto)-biographies. It is in such a specific re-writing project that Tilakasiri has been indulging during the past one year or so.

The point, nonetheless, is that whether Mr. Jayewardene may feel personally hurt or not, everybody should have the right to form and express political opinions about the commissions and omissions of rulers, whether they are retired or incumbent. Political opinions are political and value judgments; no ruler, not even Mr. Premadasa to whose glory these Tilakasiri columns are largely devoted, should bar the right of others to exercise their right of publicly expressing politically-perceived opinions.

Meanwhile, the Liberal Party in a statement, notes "with considerable surprise" the demands of the former President. The Liberals believe that the statements referred to by President Jayewardene, in his letter of demand to Mr Jayatilleke, are "not defamatory". According to the Liberal Party, this is because the statements are "substantially true or are covered by the defences to *prima facie* defamatory statements which include justification and fair comment." The Liberals also feel that it is "futile for a head of government to disclaim responsibility for actions committed under his aegis by those directly responsible to him."

At a time when some of the political tabloids—*Yukthiya*, *Rajaliya* and *Aththa*—are defending in court their right to inform the public on a certain vital issue that has embarrassed the government, Anuruddha Tilakasiri would do well by the Sri Lankan journalistic community to challenge Mr. Jayewardene's narrowly legalistic claims.

Tears and Curses

The recent political manipulations of women and their maternal emotions have disturbing implications at the levels of ideological and political practice.

In patriarchal societies where there is control of women's labour, reproduction and sexuality by males, there is also a simultaneous idealisation and sanctification of the family and celebration of motherhood. Women are represented in the roles of wife, mother and daughter that are subordinate to male roles, never equal. They are characterised as weak, needing the protection of males and, in a further extension, as less rational and more emotional. Tears then become their accepted means of expression.

These attitudes were fully demonstrated at the recent Mothers' Front meeting at the New Town Hall. Women were accorded performative space in public to express their grief and sorrow over the killings and disappearances of their children through the medium of tears. Speaker after speaker tried to outdo each other in provoking floods of tears; though much capital was made of the father who

died at the meeting, it was as if sorrow over lost children was purely a function of maternity.

There is also the role assigned to women as the carriers and bearers of culture. In our society this means that women have a primary and initiating role in religious and magical rituals. This aspect was demonstrated in the second part of the Mothers' Front gathering at the *Kalikoovil* in Modera.

The mothers present there made a *kannalawwa* - an appeal - to the Great Mother, Bhadra Kali, characterised as "the great goddess who shows no mercy to evil-doers, who punishes the killers of the people, who brings sinners into disgrace and contempt" in order to redress their grievances. They wanted Kali, before the end of this year, to punish and bring about the downfall of the present 'evil' administration which has been responsible for "terror, corruption, repression and state terrorism"; the regime was also accused of causing "the abduction, torture, murder, disfigurement and cremation on piles of tyres of hundreds of thousands of children"; it was also finally held responsible for "the unfortunate condition of the children, the sons of the Buddha (the monks), university teachers, artists and the members of the police and security forces who are involved in the protection of the North and the East". A curious irony was that this *kannalawwa* had to be read out by a male on behalf of the mothers.

Tears and curses on a massive scale such as this are no doubt dramatic and temporarily empowering. Yet what are the implications of the political use of women's grief through tears and of anger through curses? The disappearance of thousands of young men and women is a fact that cries out for justice and the grief of the mothers is genuine. However, even if its use as a political tool is, as some argue, merely tactical to bring pressure on a regime that is widely rumoured to be susceptible to magic and sorcery, it means an unquestioning acceptance of gender stereotyping, of the notion that tears and hysterics are weapons appropriate to women.

It should also be remembered that the control and manipulation of women through appeals to their emotions is a traditional practice of racist authoritarian societies. Hitler cynically manipulated women, honouring them as Aryan mothers (particularly of soldiers) while depriving them of hard-won economic and political rights; through mass rallies, Mother's Day celebrations and other forms of mobilisation, German women were drained of their rational persona and conditioned, by appeals to emotion, to follow the leader, wherever he led, uncritically.

In Sri Lanka too, there is a sub-text of racism in the mobilisation of mothers by politicians. The appeal is very much to Sinhala mothers in terms that valorise Sinhala-Buddhist values and identities. Mothers of the 'Other' (the



Tamils) were scarcely mentioned as if the tears they shed had no meaning?

The resort to divine or demonic help in order to achieve mundane political objectives has now become an accepted part of political mobilisation. The opposition parties resorted to it in the *pada yatra* (long march) to Kataragama and, as indicated above, in the prayers at the *Kali kovil*. The state too resorts to such ceremonies all the time; the President's 68th birthday was celebrated with *bodhi pujas* as well as *deva pujas* and no official occasion is complete

without some religious or quasi-religious ritual. What is significant now is that such invocations are public and acknowledged; they are no longer kept secret. The dark underworld in which demons and sorcerers earlier lived has burst its way into the light.

Rationalist and enlightenment traditions of politics constituted for many decades the bases of democratic political conduct in Sri Lanka. When demons enter, can democracy survive?

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VOODOO IN POLITICS

What, with apologies to Graham Greene, has sixty years of universal franchise produced in Sri Lanka's political culture? Sorcery.

Sorcery has now emerged as a respectable mode of political communication and practice in this island while parliamentary democracy still refuses to vanish into oblivion. Both the ruling party and the opposition have of late begun to resort to witchcraft, cursing and sorcery in the race for political wish-fulfillment. During the impeachment crisis, there were many stories being circulated regarding politicians summoning to their service a variety of super-natural characters—deities, demons and all. Some news reports even mentioned that certain MPs went to the House on the day of the impeachment debate armed with charmed oils to counter-act other charms set out by their law-maker opponents!

In a land where mass culture accommodates a whole variety of cosmologies and where rationalism co-exists with demons and goblins, it is still too early to expect politicians to say 'no' to extra-rational modes of political conduct. Nonetheless, what we are concerned with here is not just the superstitious practices resorted to by individual politicians for lengthening their political careers, but with an apparently new phenomenon of substituting sorcery for democratic forms of political mobilization and conduct.

A whole plethora of such practices, which treat the people as subjects to be governed by forces that are extra-terrestrially located, has sprung up recently as means of political mobilization.

Its precursor was the *bodhi pujas*. Worshipping a particular species of a tree, re-planting it in a terrain sacred, is

essentially a religio-cultural thing. Yet, political *bodhi pujas* are more than that; at one level they constitute an appalling measure of political sycophancy. At another level—and this is what we are really concerned with here—they represent a specific enterprise organized by politicians to exploit and manipulate the religious emotions of the people. Its most pernicious aspect is the summoning of mass crowds, using coercive organs of state power as well, to pseudo-religious congregations to invoke blessings on individual politicians who anyway are already protected by numerous armed agencies of the state.

In politics, as in day to day life, there is now only a very thin line between entreating divine intervention and mustering demonic forces for both good and bad. As we report in this issue of *Pravada*, the opposition campaign for human rights too has entered the arena of cursing rituals.

The emergence of sorcery as a political weapon is indeed symptomatic of the sheer decadence of democratic political culture in this island where a long tradition of

open political competition, debate, discussion and electoral mobilization has existed. Cursing and sorcery, *bodhi pujas* and charms—they defy all traditions of political enlightenment. They are in fact sinister substitutes for open and competitive politics conventionally conducted by means of democratic organs of civil society—political parties, trade unions, electoral organizations, professional bodies etc.

'Decay of political institutions' is a phrase once used by Mick Moore, a long-time Sri Lanka watcher, to describe some aspects of political change in the post-1977 period. Moore was specifically referring to the weakening of the

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