
THE CONTRADICTIONS OF RELIGIOUS PRETENSIONS

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Kandy the so called “sacred city” resembled a fortress recently with armed sentries swarming all over the place protecting a powerful foreigner beloved by our government who was also honoured by being allowed into the inner shrine room of the Dalada Maligawa. The contradictions implicit in this drama illustrated the hypocrisy and humbug of religion in Sri Lanka these days, with its shallow outward show of sanctimonious piety, interminable ritual, and irrational phobias about religious conversion. The visitor so lavishly hosted and rigorously protected was not a revered religious dignitary, entertainer, inventor, sports icon, or for that matter any kind of international celebrity. He was no other than the Myanmar tyrant Than Shwe, whose military junta has ruled that country with an iron fist for 37 years suppressing all dissent and evoking international condemnation and sanctions for its gross violation of human rights.

The military dictatorship has shown its undisguised contempt for democracy by keeping the Burmese heroine and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest, and refusing to allow her party to govern despite winning a landslide election victory 19 years ago in that country’s first multi party election. Instead, the miserable legacy of poverty and social and economic degradation left by harsh military governance is epitomized by a single statistic. In 2006, according to WHO the life expectancy of the average male in Myanmar was 57 years one of the lowest in the world. The average Sri Lankan male can expect to live at least 12 years longer! It would seem that despite its Buddhist pretensions the ruling junta cares little about reverence for life which is a core value of Buddhism.

Consequently, it was hardly surprising that when cyclone Nargis, the worst natural disaster in the country’s modern history, hit Burma in 2008 killing nearly 150,000, and severely affecting 2 ½ million others, the world watched aghast, for according to Human Rights Watch, ‘while deaths mounted, Burma’s ruling generals were slow to react and flatly refused to accept foreign aid ... for several weeks after the cyclone had struck, the US amphibious assault ship USS ESSEX was moored 60 nautical miles off Burma’s southern coast, while the French naval vessel ship Le Mistral waited in the same waters. These ships sailed to the area on a humanitarian mission. Tens of thousands of gallons of drinking water, ambulances, heavy trucks and medical teams could have reached Burma within hours by helicopters and landing craft from the Essex. Le

Mistral carried a cargo of 1,000 tons of food, enough to feed at least 100,000 people for two weeks, as well as thousands of shelters for the homeless. But the Burmese authorities refused to let them in ...”

However, what ought to outrage Buddhists in Sri Lanka more than all this is the military junta’s brutal persecution of Buddhist monks who in 2007 provided inspiring leadership for the masses agitation of a beleaguered population desperately crying out for basic living conditions and freedoms. According to a major to a major Human Rights Watch publication released this September monks have been shot, arrested, beaten and abducted. Hundreds of monks continue to be imprisoned and thousands remain fearful of military repression. Many have left their monasteries or sought refuge abroad, while those who remain live under constant surveillance. Monasteries have been raided with monks being subjected to abusive interrogation and arbitrary detention. It would appear that many monasteries today have only a fraction of the monks they had two years ago.

There is no comparison whatsoever between this horrible scenario and some fuzzy poorly documented incident recently in Sri Lanka where a Christian pastor is supposed to have peacefully prayed over two terminally sick people who had later passed away in hospital. Yet over this little local incident militant enraged Buddhist mobs violently smashed a Christian prayer centre while members of an extreme Buddhist political party including monks were caught in camera in the thick of the riot. Why are these religious fanatics who radiate an ugly attitude of hate, aggression, insecurity, and bitterness ostensibly in defence of Buddhism (but in total contravention of the letter and spirit of the teachings of its compassionate founder), so silent and indifferent when the government embraces the head of a ruthless military dictatorship that has brutalized Buddhist monks in Myanmar? Nor has the Buddhist establishment in Sri Lanka generally shown much concern (let alone moral outrage) about the cruel treatment of monks in Myanmar, compared to its current phobic obsession with and frenzied reaction towards peaceful religious conversions in Sri Lanka. Otherwise, public opinion would have forestalled the government from inviting the military dictator.

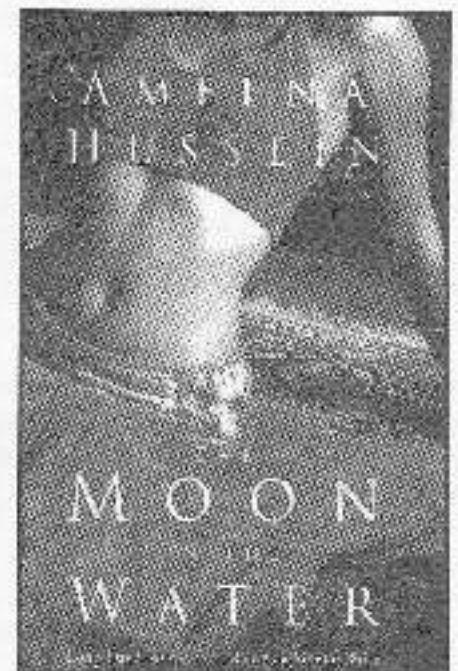
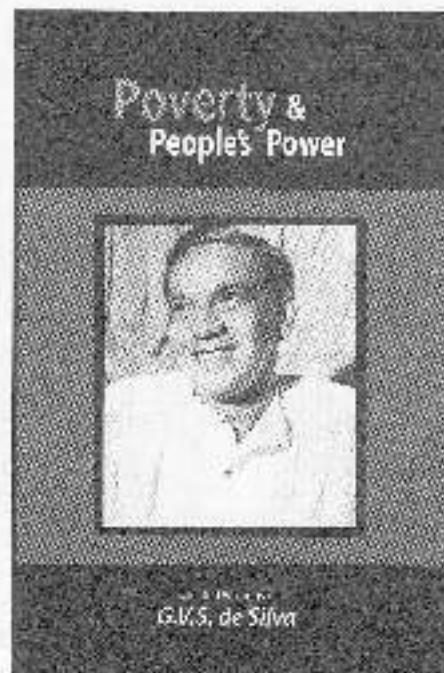
Going by responsible media reports there have been at least 225 attacks on Christian churches, pastors, and worshippers

since 2002. They have included mob violence, stoning, grievous assault and beatings, desecration and destruction of property, arson, death threats, abuse, throwing of excreta, robbery, grenade attacks, interference with worship, and even obstruction of funerals, among other forms of persecution. The irony of it is that the aggressive perpetrators who probably see themselves as 'defenders' of dharma, don't seem to care a dime when the dictator whose jackbooted underlings hammered the Sangha in Myanmar is warmly welcomed in Sri Lanka! Perhaps for most Sri Lankans religion is a matter of

being satisfied, so long as our government and those like the Burmese junta are seen to comply with the outward trappings of ceremony and empty ritual that consume formal religion. Such are the inconsistencies that underlie the hypocrisy of religion when pristine doctrine has been distorted by nationalism, and corrupted by the world. Where true religion is dead, the pretense of outward piety abounds. Sri Lanka is a case in example. ■

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