

ON THE STONE OF KING PULIYAN, PULIYANTHEEVU, ARCHAEOLOGY AND A BIT OF SLAPSTICK JOURNALISM...

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As I write this, I am in a state of confusion, disappointment and most of all feeling very bad about myself for having become a victim of third grade slapstick journalism, that had been intended to initiate publicity of the negative (?) nature to divert the attention of the masses from issues of extreme importance in Batticaloa. One fine day in early June, in my hometown of Batticaloa, I happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. A light hearted remark made by me as a joke has been used wrongly by the journalistic machinery and what we have now is a calamity of conflicting thoughts. I was flabbergasted and surprised when friends told me that my name was mentioned on the ITN news. I was also informed that the Tamil Daily - '*Sudar Ozhi*' had a story with my name about an ancient slab of stone that was unearthed in Batticaloa recently. Why? What have I done wrong this time? I thought. Well, I have had my hell raising days. Everyone does, in the early stages of their lives. But, I have been trying hard to pay the penance for my misdeeds in the past by keeping to myself and concentrating on my work. Quite lately, I have become interested on the environmental issues in Batticaloa and that's not entirely wrong. After all that's what I have been educated for. I hold a BSc honours in Environmental Science. I am by no means a specialist of any sort, let alone be it on archaeology. To find my name get involved in a controversial issue relating to archaeology is entirely annoying and is very depressing.

At this point let us go back in history to long before the pre-colonial days when Batticaloa was an unexplored territory. Theories on the origins of the people of Batticaloa are very confusing. However, there is no doubt in the fact that the people of Batticaloa are very rich in cultural heritage. *Puliyantheevu*, the little island town centre of the district gets its name from *Puliyān* - a veddah chieftain who used to hold court from the island. So I am told. Some people refer to him as King Puliyān. Was he a king, a chieftain or a prince I am not clear? The exact periods of the so-called chieftain's reign are very fuzzy. Even if they have been researched and documented I lack knowledge of it, simply because of the fact that I am neither an archaeologist nor a historian.

Recently, the Batticaloa Municipal Council workers unearthed a huge slab of granite near the Batticaloa Central Library. The slab was buried at about two feet under the ground level. I happened to be passing by when some people were having a look at the new mural (Once again a very confusing painting, speculatively intended to have been inspired by the Batticaloa culture. But, looks more like *Rajastani* art to me! Journalists please note that this is only a

humorous remark and needs no further reporting or speculation!). Batticaloa being the small idyllic town has its downfalls. One of them is that you tend to know almost each and everyone in the town. Which is good if you want to borrow money. If you know a lot of people, think of the money you can raise before you escape into the wilderness of *Paduvankara!* But this aspect tends to have its negative sides as well as I have found out lately, if you are some one who is a confounded joker, who makes light hearted remarks about everything under the sun for the sake of humour. One thing lead to the other and I had the opportunity (misfortune?) of seeing the '*so called stone of Puliyān*'. There was a representative of the Express newspapers amongst the party. All of them were speculating on the origins of the stone. And, being the loud mouth that I am, I also joked on the matter. But, I remember saying that if they needed further clarification the best thing they could do was to contact scholars from the Eastern University (that was no joke). That was sneered upon. Most probably the people there didn't like the idea of a university being the centre of knowledge, academic learning and research for the locality. Coming back to the description of the stone it was quite large. About three and a half feet by six feet in size and about three to five inches thick. From what I saw with my eyes it had no inscriptions, hieroglyphics, or any kind of text written on it to claim it to be a '*kalvettu*'. On the contrary, it was smeared with tar. I doubt that King *Puliyān* would have bothered to paint graffiti on a slab of stone or would have had tar at his disposal in those good old days! If it were from the good old days why was it buried only two feet under the ground? How could it get smeared with tar? Where were the other remains of *Puliyān's* legacy? These are some questions that they (the ones who have made a complete mess of this matter) forgot to ask before jumped on to conclusions.

From what I hear... due to improper journalism. The yarn has been spun in such a way to make the slab of stone an item of cultural heritage from an era 2500 years ago. I humbly put forward some more questions here. 2500 years ago... so that was about the time of *Kuveni*, King *Vijaya* and their love story! So if *Puliyān* was from that period was he related to *Kuveni*? Why didn't he, the local boy who had the habit of writing diaries on slabs of stone, document the marriage of *Kuveni* to King *Vijaya*? Was he by any chance at all invited to the wedding?

On the other hand the news scoop (the official (?) story told by the press) continues on further...

And, Manoharadas Manobavan (whoever he is), an archaeologist/scholar and expert in the Batticaloa history who has come from the UK to speculate on the origins and purposes of the stone, has commented that it is indeed from an era dating to the time of *Puliyān* (I doubt whether he said this all). I personally know that he is not a scholar or an Indiana Jones figure that goes hunting for the Holy Grail in Nazi inflicted Europe. He's no expert on the history of Batticaloa either. He's just a frustrated youth, who is a product of the painstakingly time consuming higher education system of our country. He has nothing to do with archaeology but is very much concerned with the natural environment of Batticaloa. He would like people to start thinking about our lagoon, mangroves, and forests, and begin to find ways of saving them.

Furthermore, I being him (Manoharadas Manobavan) is a firm believer in science and how it can be used to prove and disprove things. I am annoyed with the fact that the authorities never bothered to report this matter to the scholars at the university. How can these people be in charge of the local government if they have no such appreciation for scientific inference? On the contrary they decided to spin their own yarn and used some classic slapstick journalism to make a mountain out of a molehill. This leads to the speculation that the whole *Puliyān* issue has been intended to function as decoy to deter the general public's attention from other issues of importance. These are things that I shouldn't talk about, things that are very controversial, yet important. I won't even dare mention those facts for I am no journalist either. (Do we all think that we are beginning smell a rat here?). From what I understand, journalism is a very powerful tool that if effectively used can topple governments, split up marriages (if you are a Hollywood showbiz couple) and make and break the leaders of nations. Even though it is not an exact science, journalism is scientific in many ways. Integrity is an essential trait in science and good journalism is built entirely upon honesty in reporting the facts. Were the involved journalists in this matter being truthful to their profession? I'll let you the reader be the judge of it. I like many people with some kind of formal education believe in the power of the written word. After all this is the age of the information revolution. Anybody who fails to provide the correct information at the correct time canNOT by any chance call him or herself a journalist. They are a disgrace to their profession. These are the ones who fail in fulfilling the very basic traits of being a journalist. You need to be inquisitive, be able to follow a lead and use your rational thought to filter out the false information. Have the concerned parties done all this? I do not know.

At this point I would like to quote from a song by Michael Jackson – who had his whole career made and broken by the journalists and the paparazzi. The song is appropriately titled 'Tabloid Junkie' and here is how it goes (an overly summarised version):

Speculate to break the one you hate
 Circulate the lie you confiscate
 It's slander
 You say it's not a sword

But with your pen you torture men
 You'd crucify the Lord

Just because you read it in a magazine
 Or see it on the TV screen
 Don't make it factual, actual
 Though everybody wants to read all about it

It's slander
 With the words you use
 You're a parasite in black and white
 (You'll) Do anything for news
 Why do we keep foolin' ourselves
 You say it's not a sin
 But with your pen you torture men...

Just because you read it in a magazine
 Or see it on the TV screen
 Don't make it factual, actual
 You're so damn disrespectful

I don't think I need to say anything else, for Michael Jackson has already sung about what I think of such third grade slapstick journalism. On the other hand, people whom I know (sociologists, environmentalists and academics) have been campaigning for the sake of proper environmental management in Batticaloa. These are the concerned people, who are genuinely worried about the mushrooming liquor shops in Batticaloa town and in the fact that the district has the highest per capita beer consumption for the whole of Sri Lanka and etc. Their voices remain unheard, for no journalist bothers about listening to them. A lot of dirt can be unearthed and properly reported in this district that is slowly emerging to normalcy from the last twenty years of civil war. Do the journalists ever bother about reporting these matters? I doubt whether they are aware of the dangers the increasing number of prawn farms around the lagoon or the fact that the local water board is facing very severe problems due to land encroachment and illegal colonisation in the catchment area of the *Kalluān* fresh water wells (should I be using the word reservoir here?). These are problems that need proper journalistic work. This is all about life and death in this part of the world. The rich are getting richer by exploiting the system (and most of all Batticaloa's natural resources) – and the poor are getting poorer by being exploited by the rich. Money can buy things. But as we find in Batticaloa - money (coupled with power), to an extent can also buy invincibility and indemnity. You become indestructible yet you destroy everything for the sake of your personal financial upliftment. Batticaloa nowadays is very much like the frontier towns that are shown in Clint Eastwood movies. Clint could ride in anytime and start shooting at the big shots and corrupted bureaucrats! I'll be very happy if he could do that, but I hear that he's very busy up in Hollywood enjoying his retirement. Jokes apart, what happened years ago, (even though of cultural and archaeological value) is relatively nothing compared to these above-mentioned socio-environmental problems that are faced by our contemporary Batticaloa society. Isn't it the duty of

the press to educate the general masses on these issues? Instead of doing that they spend their time spinning yarns about myths that never were true (even if there are true they need to be investigated further by the proper experts who have the necessary skills and specialisation to deal with such issues). Most of the times I find that they (the slapstick journalists) act like poets from the days of the *Tamil Sangam*, writing about the achievements of the high ranking officials (thank god that we don't have kings anymore!) who run Batticaloa. However, the poets of the *Sangam* era were well known for their honesty and academic pride and they never lowered themselves to tell things that are not true ('lies' to you and I – who are part of the poor and exploited general masses of this godforsaken land). Due to this kind of behaviour by some irresponsible journalists, we the general masses are beginning to doubt whether that there is any purpose in having newspapers and such. Who needs such papers if all they publish is illogical gossip? Our grannies can do it definitely better can't they? No need for automated presses and computers, all we need are some cellular phones for the old ladies and they'll be more than happy to take care of the gossip for us!

Switching back to the serious mode... Once again I wish to state that journalism is a very powerful tool. If it is handled properly – it can be the best weapon that ever was/is/will be. A journalist has the power to fight corruption, mismanagement and all sorts of

malice with his pen. I feel that this very powerful tool is not being used properly in the Batticaloa district. The need for proper journalistic work in a post war area is essential, as it is the only way of documenting the pluses and minuses of the recovery process. I humbly request all the concerned parties to think about this and start reporting about things for their merits and demerits... we do not want fiction. We can read it in the novels.

To conclude, I wish to apologise to the academics at the Eastern University for not having let them know about this issue. I have let them down. I sincerely hope that they will accept my apologies and help find a way to investigate on the origins of this slab of stone. I do not wish to offend neither anyone nor any organisation by this article. On the contrary, I humbly beg all of you to think more on the issues that are important to Batticaloa, for our survival as a community. A lot of things can be accomplished if we, the general masses unite and start thinking about the future of our hometown and our district. We can't expect miracles to happen – just like that... yet we can achieve things by hardship and commitment. So why wait? Our home (town) needs some spring-cleaning. Let's all unite to do it! And finally, the joker in me suggests that I remind you (the reader) once again that I am no archaeologist. I have no intention of becoming one either! I am just a nondescript Batticaloa boy. Proud and very happy to be so (and this by no means isn't a joke)! Just let me live my life in peace. Amen! ■

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