

## TIME OF TROUBLE, TIME FOR READING

The escalation of the conflict in Sri Lanka will result in much violence, death and destruction. Moreover the rising cost of living, along with high inflation that is eroding real income levels, creates much misery among the poor and the low-income families. When the despair begins to build up, there is a risk for socially and politically sensitive people to feel depressed, withdraw to a world of negative contemplation or to privilege cynicism. Claude Cockburn, an eminent British journalist and cynic, famously said in his autobiography, *In Time of Trouble* (1957), "Between the crisis and the catastrophe, there is always time for a glass of champagne." We are not so cynical, but we do say that the time of trouble is, perhaps a time for reading and analysing.

This issue of *Polity* is an antidote to those who run the risk of being affected by despair. In the form of a special, end-of-the year issue of book reviews, *Polity* recommends a number of books that are worth reading to keep our readers' spirits undiminished.

Reflecting on reading, there are some fascinating developments in the culture of reading in our society. Despite the claims made by some purists that people have abandoned the habit of reading, books and newspapers do seem to have a flourishing market. The number of weekend newspaper in Sinhalese, Tamil and English has increased significantly during the past few years. The easy availability of publishing technology is not the only

explanation of this proliferation of popular reading material. In terms of price, Sri Lanka has the most expensive newspapers, periodicals and popular magazines in South Asia. But despite the high price, ordinary citizens do seem to read them. Sometimes, neighbors exchange weekend newspapers in a cooperative system of sharing of cost.

The annual International Book Fair in Colombo every September is the other indication of how a reading, and book-buying culture has spread among all social strata. The whole week of the Book Fair was in a way a public spectacle. Not only middle-class readers from Colombo, but also school teachers and students from rural areas visited the Fair, bought bundles of books and walked back displaying an unmistakable sense of joy. The huge number of new book publishers in Sinhala is another facet of this reading culture one noticed at the Colombo Book Fair. The success of the Perera-Hussein Publishing House, the SSA publications and the Young Socialist Publications show us that there is still a thriving market for writing in English.

But there is also a flip side to this story. The most vociferous of the political and ideological leaders in the country, who think the nation's destiny is in their hands, do not demonstrate any particular evidence of having read any new books in their chosen areas of specialty. Their ideas of democracy, governance, human rights, minority

rights, women's rights, social change, ethnic conflict, peace etc. are somewhat outdated. They not only prove the point that demagogic politics require no culture of reading or learning but they also point to the poverty of reigning ideologies that define the path of political change in contemporary Sri Lanka. **P**

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