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Pravada in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

MONTH OF MANY ANNIVERSARIES

Ten years ago, in July 1983, there was the pogrom against the Tamils in Colombo and other areas in the south. This event was a nodal point in the transformation of the ethnic conflict into a civil war which still rages on and which has resulted in an incalculable loss of life and property as well as a flood of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees into the wide world.

Six years ago, in July 1987, the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord was signed. It was the most significant attempt so far to resolve the ethnic conflict through the recognition of the Tamil people's right to self-governance in areas predominantly inhabited by them, even though it did not go far enough in this direction. On the other hand, it was signed in Colombo under almost siege conditions, in the face of rioters who were violently protesting the signing of the Accord and of its consequence, the stationing of Indian peace-keeping forces in the country. These riots marked in fact the beginnings of the insurgency in the south, an insurgency which lasted into 1990, with, again, a loss of life which ran into tens of thousands.

One year ago, in July 1992, General Kobbekaduwa and several other high-ranking security officers were blown up in an explosion at Arali

Point, which two commissions of inquiry have blamed on the LTTE.

This last incident was but one sad episode in the ongoing war and had no particular significance in itself; however, it played a role, albeit minor, in the politics of the south. We include it here, side by side with events of greater importance, because it was the incident most commemorated in the south this July. A public meeting in Colombo and several others in other cities, a rash of posters on the walls and numerous articles in the newspapers attested to the political and ideological use of the death of Kobbekaduwa: here was a soldier who had sacrificed his life to protect the integrity and sovereignty of his motherland against a separatist threat; since his death there had been no significant military operation against the LTTE; this was because of the duplicity of political leaders who may have had a hand in his death, precisely in order to subvert the purposeful pursuit of the war. Based on this reading of what is already legend, the commemorators demanded war, real war that would end in the total liquidation of the LTTE.

These commemorations also had their links with the riots against the peace accord. The line of heroes which ended with Kobbekaduwa began with the "naval rating", an

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obvious reference to the man who struck Rajiv Gandhi with the butt of his gun at the ceremonial inspection. The particular rhetoric of the posters, so reminiscent of the JVP, appeared also to include in their pantheon all those who had died in the anti-IPKF mobilisation in the south.

Of July 1983, there was precious little public commemoration, as if it was subject to some kind of general amnesia. This is some indication of where we are now in the long process of ethnic reconciliation.

The most recent attempt to find a consensus solution - the Parliamentary Select Committee - continues to exist as legal fiction and a screen behind which the government sometimes seeks cover. However, it ceased to exist as a meaningful forum

when it began to be an expression of "majority opinion" and the Tamil parties withdrew their participation. There are thus no current formal efforts towards ending the war and working for a peaceful resolution. The problem is considered by most, as a terrorist phenomenon, thus, one demanding a military solution. This is the position that President Wijetunga took soon after his assumption of office. He saw no ethnic problem; his evidence was that the Sinhalese and the Tamils lived together without strife in the south and worked together in the same offices in the same pursuits. A Sinhala newspaper that quoted the President with great approval as having at last attained the truth added another bit of evidence: the Sinhalese and the Tamils in the south put their money in the same banks. Gunadasa Amarasekera reacted to the President's statement in terms of Buddhist theology; the Head of State had at last achieved "Right Understanding". However blind and stupid these arguments are, this is the manner in which the majority of the Sinhalese still perceive the problem.

The reality of course is very different. Tamils living in the south are still very much at risk, except perhaps those who still enjoy some kind of class immunity, merely by reason of being Tamil. This was amply demonstrated by the waves of arrests in and around Colombo during the last three months. Literally thousands of Tamils, irrespective of age and sex, were taken into custody, in what the police are wont to describe as operations for a reason for which no Sinhalese would have to languish in custody: their inability to prove their identity to the satisfaction of the police. These are generally the innocent victims of the war but the hazards they face are no less real and traumatic than those faced by their fellow Tamils in the areas of military conflict.

The terrible tragedy is this: that the only answer to the problem is the devolution of political power is generally accepted at a rational level by almost all political parties; but the debates about the extent and unit of devolution are dominated by irrational and atavistic fears and foreboding on both sides. Particularistic versions of history and interpretations of past experience govern the debate, not a rational understanding of present reality, both internal and external. We recognise the importance of ideology and its powerful impact on social and political processes; we also recognise the abiding need to change consciousness in the interests of a plural, democratic society in Sri Lanka.

In the meantime, we wish to commemorate in this issue of *Pravada* some aspects and effects of the violence, often very brutal, that have been the inevitable concomitant and consequence of all the July incidents we have referred to. People have died; others have lost their families; still others have lost their properties; all have suffered indignities to their sense of identity and self.

These are the often unrecorded facts of conflict; if they are recorded at the time of occurrence, they quickly fade from memory, just as the fact that there are presently more than 600,000 displaced persons in the country, the sad victims of conflict, is not at the forefront of discussions about ways of ending the conflict and restoring peace.

What all the anniversaries, celebrated or not, indicate is the centrality of the ethnic problem in our lives. We cannot move towards a more humane, more democratic and more egalitarian society without settling this conflict on just terms.

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