

## A NOVELIST SILENCED

**P**ramoedya Ananta Toer, the celebrated Indonesian novelist, is one of the persons questioned by the security authorities in that country on the recent demonstrations in Jakarta. The demonstrations which turned into rioting in the streets of Jakarta were primarily caused by government efforts to disrupt the opposition party by ousting its leader, Megawati, and installing in her place a more amenable person. This they did through a trumped up Party Congress at which the key note speech was blatantly delivered by the Commander of the Indonesian army. This kind of intervention is justified by Indonesian armed forces on the basis of a concept called 'dwi-fungsi' which is written into the country's laws - that the army has two functions: one, the protection of the country's territorial integrity from either external or internal threats and two, ensuring the stability of the country through intervention in its economic, social and political processes.

The riots which followed were the first in Indonesia for a decade and marked the first serious challenge to the New Order regime of Suharto who has ruled Indonesia for 30 years, very much in the manner of a feudal Javanese king. They are said to have caused millions of dollars of damage; police attempts to control them have left at least three dead and hundreds injured. The man behind the riots, according to the security authorities, is a young trade union organiser; he has in the last few years gained support from many workers for his independent union.

Though the riots were the direct result of government manipulation, it looks as if the authorities are still afraid of the remnants of the old Communist Party. The questioning of Ananta Toer can only be understood in this light.

I met Ananta Toer in his house in a suburb of Jakarta last year and the following notes are partly based on what I learnt from him. He was dressed in a white sarong and a banian when I met him; he introduced his wife as his stri.

He showed me his identity card which was marked ET - ex-Tapol - identifying him as a member of the presently banned Communist Party. This identification means that he cannot move out of Jakarta without permission from the local security authorities. He cannot leave the country; his applications for a passport have been just ignored. It also means that his children will be considered security risks and will never be selected for any government job. He shares this kind of identity card with about a hundred thousand other Indonesians.

He tells me that he was not a member of the party but was the President of a Union of progressive writers that had some links with it. He had by then written several novels and a book on Tirto Adi Suryo, the publisher and editor of the first Indonesian-owned newspaper, the organiser of the first 'legal aid service', co-founder of the first modern political organization and a pioneer of

literature in the native languages. Toer was not involved with any party political activity but was nevertheless arrested after the crackdown on the party in 1965. The security personnel who came to arrest him collected all his books and manuscripts and burned them in the compound of his house. He spent the next 15 years of his life in a concentration camp on Buru island in Eastern Indonesia. He was released in 1979 without any charge and has never faced a judicial trial. He now lives under the restricted conditions I have described.

Life on Buru island was hard. The detainees had to grow their own food and manage on what they could glean from the land. They were denied newspapers, books or writing material to begin with; these were given only in the last few years of his incarceration.

It was during this period that he began to compose in his mind the quartet of novels that was to make him famous - *This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps* and *The Glass House*. These novels are loosely based on the life of Suryo and are an attempt to delineate developments in Indonesia from the colonial period to independence and to describe the emergence of a nationalist consciousness that welded the nation of Indonesia from a huge number of islands that were home to many groups of disparate people. I might loosely describe them as doing for Indonesia in a more complex way what Martin Wickremasinghe did for Sri Lanka in the trilogy beginning with *Gamperaliya*.

Max Lane, the translator of these novels into English, says: "Pramoedya only obtained writing materials and the opportunity to write in the last few years of his life at Buru. Prior to this, he had narrated to his fellow prisoners the story". The last two lines of print in the latest edition of second volume of his quartet - *Child of All Nations* - illustrates this situation: it says "Buru Island Prison Camp, spoken 1973, written 1975".

Toer has written many more novels since then but nearly all his books are unavailable to Indonesians. They are banned by the government on the ground that they contain or try to convey Marxist-Leninist teachings. As elsewhere, these are charges made by authoritarian governments against anyone who opposes or espouses a dissenting point of view. To quote Max Lane again: "He is feared by the government not so much because of hidden Marxist Leninist teachings but because he represents a genuine Indonesian tradition, a tradition that follows in the footsteps of Tirto Adi Suryo, a tradition of standing up for the truth, that the current regime cannot accept. The regime also fears him because, despite what it says, his books are enormously popular amongst all those who get a chance to read them." He is also feared because he reminds the present rulers of Indonesia of one of the slogans of the independence struggle - Indonesia Merdeka, Adil Dan Makmur - a free, just and prosperous Indonesia.

The ban on his books is actively implemented though I did see some clandestine copies. His editor and publisher have been subject to regular investigation and have spent time in detention. Students at the University of Indonesia were arrested and expelled when, in 1981, they invited Pramoedya to speak on the campus. Members of a study group at the Gajah Mada State University have been sentenced to seven years in jail on the charge that they possessed, read and discussed his novels. His translator, Max Lane was the Second Secretary in the Australian Embassy in Jakarta in 1980; he was recalled after pressure from the Indonesian government.

When I met him, he was working on an encyclopaedia of Indonesia. He cannot get a job; he can earn nothing from his writings within

Indonesia; his only income is from the royalties on the translations of his novels. He hopes that the encyclopaedia will not be banned; he hopes that it will accomplish two purposes - earn him some money and enable Indonesians to learn more about their vast archipelago and its peoples. When I told him that it might be difficult to keep value judgements out of even an encyclopedia, he replied that he would try to stick to bare facts.

I found him a man of humility. He was sad, angry but not bitter. He still had hopes for democracy in Indonesia.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer is a presence in Indonesia, even in his enforced silence.

C.A.

## SINHALAS, THEIR EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL ORIGINS AND SCHOLARS FROM GAGALAND

Sasanka Perera

A few months ago I wrote an essay attempting to place in perspective the status of sociological and anthropological training and teaching in Sri Lanka. The picture I painted, with which many people agreed, was not good. Sri Lankan higher education in general, and social science education in particular, is clearly in a state of serious crisis. The combined fields of sociology and anthropology are perhaps the worst affected in this climate of intellectual pauperization even though the situation is not much different in the rest of social sciences. An example that would amply illustrate this generalization has been offered by two articles published in the *Sunday Observer* of 12th May 1996 and 07th July 1996.

The original article authored by Mihindukulasuriya Susantha Fernando published on the 12th of May argues that the Sinhals are the descendants of gods or extra-terrestrial beings. He has already taken for granted that the ancient Egyptians were also the descendants of such space persons. He treats this as a historical reality and uses it for comparison with the case of the Sinhals. After posing the question as to the extra-terrestrial origins of the Sinhals, Fernando answers in the affirmative by stating that the "answer is found in the historical perspective of superhuman feats, incredible bravery, awe-inspiring spiritual enlightenment, and steadfast moral uprightness of the ancient Sinhala" (SO 12 May 1996). However, this kind of self-congratulatory and pompous descriptions of the perceived heritage of the ethno-religious or cultural group one belongs to is common to every human person, and is deeply rooted in what seems to be humanity's inherent ethnocentrism. Such statements do not constitute reasoned arguments.

### Fantasies of Extra-Terrestrials

Humans have always had a fascination with extra-terrestrial beings and space ships. There is nothing strange about it. A healthy imagination is in fact an asset. But when that imagination makes nonsensical inroads into academia there is a clear reason for alarm. After all, there is a legitimate need to distinguish between clear fiction and possible fact. As we know, many space buffs and pseudo historians have speculated for a long time that extra-terrestrial beings have landed on earth at various points in time and even transferred some technology long before modern NGOs. The "proof" for such landings usually amounts to highly speculative assumptions and rock paintings of figures that look similar to modern space travellers from earth. These assumptions are usually based on lack of knowledge or evidence in the archaeological record to clearly indicate how a certain great monument was constructed at a particular point in time when technology was not adequately sophisticated.

So it seems that the obvious answer is that such monuments might be the work of extra-terrestrials or earthlings who got tuition from them. The rock paintings, it would appear, depict the tuition masters. Many such explanations come from academics who try to explain monuments in the ancient world including the pyramids in Egypt as well as many Mayan and Inca monuments. The mythic continent of Atlantis was another source of such speculation. But none of these speculations ever gained any serious legitimacy within mainstream historical, archaeological or anthropological scholarship.