

One of Mr. Charles Abeysekera's concerns was increasing violence taking place in Sri Lanka in both social and individual relations. When he was invited by the prestigious Madras newspaper *The Hindu* to contribute an essay to the Special Supplement on Sri Lanka's fiftieth anniversary of independence, he wrote the following essay which is also one of his last writings.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON VIOLENCE

Charles Abeysekera

I shall begin this essay with a description of two seemingly simple incidents and then tentatively attempt to draw from these illustrative examples some inferences concerning the state of Sri Lankan society today. The essay therefore will be impressionistic rather than factual.

Ragging, the harassment of freshers by their seniors at the commencement of an academic year, is a recurring phenomenon in Sri Lankan universities and institutes of higher education. It has developed from a mild form of hazing lasting over a few days to extremely violent forms of physical torture lasting over weeks. Efforts by the university authorities themselves to put a stop to this practice have been totally fruitless. Attempts by university teachers to curb the practice, as for example by threatening not to take senior classes, have been sporadic and again fruitless. The student unions issue rhetorical denunciations but really condone the practice. Ragging has therefore continued to become more and more violent with every passing year to the point where the government is now contemplating legislation to deal specifically with the problem.

The first incident that I have chosen deals with a Tamil student called Varapragash who obtained entry to the medical faculty at the University of Peradeniya this year. He was ragged by his seniors and ended up in the hospital at Kandy in a very serious condition; he died three weeks later. The proceedings at the post-mortem inquiry revealed that he had been forced to drink copious quantities of alcohol to which he was not accustomed, forced to do push-ups and other physical exercises until he collapsed; the cause of death was medically given as kidney failure.

The second incident took place about a week after Varapragash's death and the facts about it had been well publicized. It deals with a Sinhalese student who was selected for the Hardy Institute of Technology. He was ragged, very much in the same way as Varapragash and died in hospital later.

It is necessary to say that these are not isolated examples. They have occurred in a generalized atmosphere of ragging to which all new entrants are subjected to; women are ragged by senior women and Buddhist monks by senior monks. There are many more stories of students hospitalized and traumatized as a result of ragging.

The first aspect I want to deal with is the senseless and brutal violence of these two killings. It is simply unbelievable that such violence could exist in institutes of so-called higher learning within

a society that respected the dignity of the individual and the sanctity of life. This violence is in this sense an integral part of the violence that has enveloped Sri Lankan society as a whole today. Scarcely a day passes without stories of rape, murder, robbery with murder and other assorted forms of violence being highlighted in the media. Violence against both person and property have become the chosen mode of conflict resolution in social relationships. Instances are rife where family disputes end with murder.

Violence in Politics

Violence has also enveloped the sphere of politics. Elections are won or lost on the basis of the extent of intimidation backed up by violence that a party can bring to bear on the voters; rivalries between political parties or individuals in these parties are settled by the gun - as was evidenced by the murder of an MP in the runup to the local government elections in March this year and the way in which the election campaigns themselves were in fact conducted, with over three thousand cases of election-related violence being reported to the police during the three week period between nominations and polls. My colleague, Jayadeva Uyangoda, has said that this election "produced its own art - the art of election-centered warfare."

There has also been, over the last two decades or so, the growth of an underworld concerned with illicit liquor, the smuggling of drugs and gambling. I suppose unlawful activities like these have always been a part of economic life, but what is alarming in Sri Lanka today is the sheer size of such operations, the fact that the underworld is armed with sophisticated modern weapons and is unhesitant in their use, and that there appears to be some connection between this underworld and politicians. The underworld needs political patronage to secure the space for its existence and the politicians in turn use the resources of the underworld for their political advancement. Some of the members of this underworld are deserters from the state security forces, persons with training in the use of arms who have in many cases decamped with their weapons.

This brings me to the point of explication: the escalation of the ethnic conflict to the point of a war which has been waged over the past two decades with an increasing degree of violence, ferocity and brutality by both sides and its side effects have played a significant role in making our society insensitive to and receptive of violence. Many elements of Sinhalese society, which constitutes the majority, have justified violence against the minorities on the basis that

they are a threat to the continued hegemonic status of the majority. This ideology has gained strength from its articulation by many influential Buddhist monks.

The state used the same argument against dissident members of the majority who opposed the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1983 and the induction of the Indian Peace Keeping Force into Sri Lanka. Some of them, mobilizing on the basis of patriotism on the allegation that the government had in fact permitted the violation of the country's sovereignty by India, took to arms. The insurgents fought the state and its security forces with murder, assassination and the destruction of state property; they then turned to the liquidation of those who were opposed to them politically or ideologically. The state reacted in the same manner and suppressed the insurgency with ferocity. The years following 1983 thus saw the disappearance of persons, estimated at a low of 30,000 and a high of 60,000, and the violation of many fundamental rights. The trauma of that period is still with us; it is expected that the commissions appointed by this government in 1994 to investigate the disappearances will serve in some measure to establish the truth of what happened during this period and provide recompense to the victims. This experience had two contradictory results: on the one hand, it raised awareness of fundamental rights and the need for citizens to mobilize in their defense; on the other hand, it brought violence to areas untouched by the ethnic war and contributed to the its spread.

One of the important social effects of the war has been the displacement of large numbers of persons from their normal habitats and the resultant psycho-social disturbances. There are large numbers of children up to the age of 10 who have known no life other than in refugee camp.

The ethnic conflict arose from the discriminations that the Tamil people were subject to. They were alienated from the processes of political power and felt themselves unable to protect their language, culture and identity through their own agency and within the existing structures. The armed struggle which has been going on for nearly two decades was then the result. So we have a situation where alienation results in armed struggle which in turn deepens and reinforces the separation of the two communities.

Let me go back to my example of ragging to show how deep the separation between the two communities runs. Varapragash, the Tamil freshman, was ragged to death by Tamil seniors; I noted this from the fact that all the students taken into Police custody for the death were Tamils. Inquiries from a young friend at the University revealed that ragging was ethnically segmented: Tamil freshmen by Tamil seniors, Sinhalese by Sinhalese and Muslims by Muslims. So, even a relatively mundane practice like ragging, carried out within the insulated atmosphere of a university, is also subject to the cleavages found in the society at large.

Re-Imagining the Nation

This is the Sri Lankan tragedy. After 50 years of existence as an independent nation-state, Sri Lanka has virtually no nation. The fact that the government, on the eve of the 50th

anniversary celebrations, felt it necessary to launch a campaign for a Sri Lankan nation illustrates the depth of the problem. The Sri Lankan state has its citizens, but these are ethnically and in various other ways which I will come to later segmented; they have not coalesced into a nation with an identity which stands above but in conjunction with other identities. The state too is under threat of dismemberment with a significant part of the citizenry acting under the conviction that their interests can only be satisfied within the bounds of a new state.

The only possibility of reconstituting the nation is a restructuring of the state in a manner acceptable to the minorities and within which they can feel secure and comfortable. This is the effort the government is now making with its constitutional reform proposals which include the devolution of substantial powers to the regions. How these proposals can be legally and legitimately enacted is still in doubt. The government parties and the opposition UNP are still Sinhala-centered; they still approach the ethnic problem through the prism of their competition for Sinhala votes.

There is one other aspect of Sri Lankan society which I wish to illustrate through the incidents I have referred to. The Sinhala student who was killed at the Hardy Institute comes from a caste low down in the accepted hierarchy. Many young people from this caste change their names so as to avoid any caste recognition when they get to high school; this particular boy's father was in a perverse way caste-proud and had not allowed his children to change their family name. Further, the senior students charged with this crime came from so-called high caste families from the same area. Caste rivalry, the distaste which the high caste students felt at the ignominy of sitting down in class with known persons of a lower caste, lent to the ragging a degree of added ferocity.

Caste and Violence

Caste is a curious phenomenon in Sri Lanka. Most people do not speak of it; they like to pretend that it is a pre-modern form of social organization that we have left behind. Academics share this illusion; there are only a few serious studies of caste as it operates today. Nevertheless, it is a significant presence in both Sinhala and Tamil societies. Most people still reproduce themselves within the bounds of caste. Political parties, even those allegedly scientific and socialist, will select candidates for elections bearing in mind the caste composition of the electorate; they will however never admit this openly.

President Premadasa came from an allegedly low caste. He ascended to the top of the political pyramid where power was derived from the equal weightage given to each individual vote on the basis of the equality of all citizens. However, social acceptability was another matter. And he had to spend a lot of time and energy in manufacturing a somewhat more acceptable caste and class background for himself. To my mind, this is telling proof of the way that caste is still a dominant factor in our society. It can still lead, as my example illustrates, to the killing of 'uppity' low caste persons.

So to a final gathering of the many threads of this essay. Society in Sri Lanka is still pre-modern in its organization, with caste a significant factor. Universal franchise enjoyed since 1930 and the spread of modern knowledge and socialist ideologies have not reduced its pervasiveness; neither have other archaic forms such as the dependence on astrology being affected; they have displayed an unexpected degree of resilience.

A democratic politics in effect exists in tension with an anti-democratic form of social organization and anti-rational systems of knowledge.

Democratic politics also exist in a distorted form. This reduces democracy merely to the rule of the majority, leaving very little room for the tolerance of minorities or of dissent. It is this majoritarian democracy that has led to ethnic conflict, civil war and the pervasive presence of violence. It has also prevented the growth of any notion of a Sri Lankan nation within which minorities can be accommodated.

(courtesy, *The Hindu*, February 04, 1998)

SRI LANKA AT FIFTY: THE BIRTH OF A TRAGEDY

Jayadeva Uyangoda

Salman Rushdie's characters in the fictionalized account of India after independence, *Midnight's Children*, were born at the moment of India's independence midnight on August 15, 1947. My own *samsaric* encounter with the political independence of my country has been slightly different. I was not born at the time when the Union Jack was being lowered and the Lion's Flag hoisted in Colombo, on February 04, 1948. I was born two years later, in 1950. Yet, in a political- and historical sense, my own biography of past forty eight years has been closely intertwined with the fifty-year biography of post-colonial Sri Lanka. I grew up in the early fifties in the relative peace of an isolated Sinhalese village. As a nine year old, I learnt about the assassination of Prime Minister Bandaranaike, and political assassinations were to constitute a major facet of my country's politics since I reached the age of thirty eight. As an eight year-old child, in 1958, I learnt about differences between Sinhalese and Tamil communities; then, of course, even the everyday events of my entire adult life were to be governed by Sinhala-Tamil conflictual politics. I came of age in the radical sixties while being fed and educated by one of the best welfare states in the developing world. The welfare state, which also stood as an obstacle to significant economic growth potential, produced from among its own children a generation of bewildered idealists. Being one among them, I ran away from home, became a modern anarchist, tried my hand at revolution and along with my generation paid a heavy price for that misadventure. Then in the twilight of my youth, in the 1980s, I witnessed how my country all of a sudden began to lose all its idealism and hope while aggression, hostility, ethnic self-righteousness, brutality and violence were welcomed with fervor by all those who played a part in shaping Sri Lanka's political future. Presently, I watch, with no pleasure at all, how Sri Lanka is running deeper and deeper in to the crisis which has been there for many decades. In despair, I read poetry of despair. As I recently read in a poem by Pakistan's Kishwar Naheed, "I and my country were born together - We lost our sight in childhood."

The story of Sri Lanka's fifty years of independence is also the story of how a new nation-state lost its sight as well as innocence in

childhood and went awry in adulthood. This birth of an unfolding tragedy could initially be sighted by only a few. In 1956, when the Sinhalese was made the official language, Colvin R. de Silva, a Marxist parliamentarian at that time, summed it up pithily when he said: "Two languages - one country; one language: two countries." Then in the sixties, B.H. Farmer, a British geographer titled his study of Sri Lankan politics after independence, *Ceylon: A Divided Nation*.

Myths

Sri Lanka's independence of 1948 was unique in ex-colonial South Asia; it was not achieved after a long and arduous nationalist struggle as in India, Pakistan or Bangladesh. Rather, Sri Lanka's independence was 'granted' by the British, soon after decision was made to part with the 'Jewel of the Crown', British India. Sri Lanka's nationalist leaders were constitutional lobbyists at their best; practicing a highly legalistic form of nationalist agitation, they were more inclined towards constitutional reform negotiations to obtain the status of a responsible government than extra-institutional mobilization directed towards achieving swaraj. Then, of course, the post-war Labour government had decided to de-colonize the empire by leaving the South Asian sub-continent. By a stroke of fate, Sri Lanka became a direct beneficiary of the epoch-making independence struggle of the people across the Palk Straits. It was not an accident then, that February 4, 1948 fell less than a year after August 14 and 15 of 1947, the founding dates of Pakistan and India.

Sri Lanka's so-called non-violent path to independence in 1948 has given rise to a mythology, popularized mostly by secondary school text-book writers. Every school child is taught that the Sri Lankan people obtained independence without shedding a single drop of blood. In a way, the British colonial rulers did not cause much shedding of a blood, as they did in India or Africa, during their one and half a century-stay in Sri Lanka. The annexation of the island's coastal areas from the Dutch in 1796 was more a result of a change