

PERCEPTIONS OF TRADITIONS AND THE LIMITATIONS OF MIDDLE CLASS IMAGINATION

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In the *Sunday Leader* of July 16th an article appeared presenting a series of arguments against the proposed introduction of legal provisions allowing women to sue their husbands for marital rape. In the *Sunday Leader* of July 30th, an article protesting against the views presented in the original article as well as a reply by the writer of the earlier article were published.

I was a signatory to the article of protest. However, at this point in time - over two months after the first article appeared - I have no intention of entering into a debate that could simply have no end. In fact, I will say nothing about rape or the legalities of proposed legislation here. But as an anthropologist, researcher and teacher I would like to dwell upon certain dominant issues that emerged from the rhetorical "reply" to the letter of protest. Such issues form a dominant component of the contemporary middle class imagination. I would take as my point of departure the following passage:

If these 'intellectuals' are so keen on importing western concepts, why don't they also advocate living together out of wedlock as an alternative to marriage, trial marriages, single parent families so abundantly found in the west?

To me, this rhetorical question is typical of the dominant middle class perception of what is "western" and what is "traditional" or what is authentically Sri Lankan and what is not. It seems to me that the collective middle class perception of our own past is clouded by their own unconscious westernization. Without a doubt, all of us have been "westernized" to some extent or another, if by that word we mean that we have adopted components of western derived cultures. In this sense, one could also argue that the *Sunday Leader*, as a newspaper, is based on a western concept - mass media. The very idea of newspapers, particularly those written in English, would seem to be clearly western. But no one seems to have a problem with it. So it seems to me that demonization of what is perceived as western seems to depend on personal perceptions as well as subverted understanding of our own collective past.

History of Living Together: Western or Sri Lankan?

This brings me to the second point I want to address: why not advocate living together out of wedlock? Indeed why not? At one level, it seems to me that this is a very good idea. But it is not something I would advocate, not because it is such a terrible thing, but because in my view, it is a personal thing. If people do not want to waste their money in this time and age of expensive wedding rituals, they might as well do so. On the other hand, let us consider for a moment what is today meant by "living out of wedlock" and "living together". It simply means that a piece of paper signed by a government bureaucrat is not in the possession of the two (or more) individuals living together.

To move on to the third point I wish to make, let us assume, for the sake of argument, that a group of individuals ("intellectuals", "anthropologists" or whoever!) would advocate, what in today's middle class imagination is perceived as "living together". If that is the case, I would argue that, rather than importing a terrible and corrupt western concept, this would be a matter of going back to, and resurrecting, some of our own socio-cultural roots conveniently forgotten by many of us in the context of the dominant middle class puritan values. I would further argue that the western imposition is the current dominant practice of monogamous marriage and the use of marriage registrars to make those unions "legal". Such practices are in reality impositions of colonial British moral values informed by Christian morals and puritanical Victorian ethics, which as dominant components of the hegemonic imperial culture held sway at the height of colonialism. But thanks to our own colonized minds, this is what we perceive as our "two thousand year old heritage".

I would argue that until the hegemonic imposition of these foreign ideals and the colonization of our own minds to such an extent as to believe that these are Sinhala traditions with great antiquity, we as a people were not burdened with such problems as living together. In fact, what we consider as living together today was actually the norm until the collapse of the Kandyan kingdom. It seems to me that by today's middle class standards, pre-colonial Sinhala society was a more open and tolerant one, particularly in the realm of sexual practice. That was the essence of Buddhist tolerance. Isn't it an irony that while Buddhist society has become steadily Victorian, the Victorian society of Britain has perhaps got somewhat more Buddhist!

Let me refer to some of the surviving records from the Kandyan period. Consider, for instance, some of the observations of Robert Knox originally published in 1681. He says that Sri Lanka had no brothels because all women were whores. When one attempts to understand observations such as these, one has to keep in mind the socio-religious background of the writer as well as the nature of the dominant thinking at the time. Knox came from a puritanical Christian background. At that time norms governing sexual activities in Britain were extremely conservative. It was from this vantage point that Knox viewed patterns of sexual behaviour in Sri Lanka, particularly in the Kandyan region. According to Knox and other surviving colonial records, people went through four or five "marriages" until it stabilized in an institutional sense. In that sense, one could argue, that divorce was very common, easy and was the norm. Moreover, in the context of the *binna* form of marriage where the husbands were required to move into the wife's household, women wielded considerable power over their marriage. They had every right to nullify their marriage by simply asking the man to move out. Others could move in equally as easily. It was this state of affairs that made Knox perceive contemporary Sinhala women as whores.

Moreover, none of these marriages involved the kind of fanfare that is evident today. As anthropologists such as Obeyesekere and Gombrich have amply demonstrated (see *Buddhism Transformed*), today's marriage rituals were invented in late 19th and early 20th centuries to compete with Christian rituals. This was an attempt on the part of the emerging Buddhist middle class to make their marriage rituals look "posh". Before that time, there was no registration, and the only ritual was a feast hosted by both sides of the family. This was at the level of the masses. Things were somewhat more complicated among the aristocrats. By today's puritanical middle class standards, most of the people in the Kandyan period would have been living out of wedlock. They would also be horrified to know that women were allowed in the Kandyan regions to marry more than one man at the same time. These were usually a group of brothers.

These practices did horrify early missionaries and the colonial rulers as they do today's middle classes to whom those parts of our history have been lost through a sense of collective amnesia. Interestingly, a recently re-discovered ola leaf manuscript titled "Replies to Christians" (*Christhinanta Pilituru*), written in the 1830s, admonishes the missionaries not to complain about Sinhala marriage practices-the kind of practices I have referred to above. What is more, the manuscript was authored by a Buddhist monk. So clearly, what we today perceive as "living together" and divorce are not western concepts. They are as Sri Lankan and as traditional as the Sacred Bo Tree. What is more, I can take any middle class tourists who are willing to forego some of the city's comforts for a while to a range of Sinhala villages in the interior of the country where even today, the so called living together is the norm. Any large-scale revival of such practices is merely a revival of old cultural roots.

Single Parent Families

According to the rather limited middle class imagination as symbolized in my quotation above, another supposedly horrendous western condition is supposed to be the single parent families. I will not even argue this point in detail except to suggest that the so-called West where this "terrible" condition is so rife is not exactly teeming with socially mutant teenagers. Moreover, if the existing records of the divorce rates in the Kandyan period is anywhere near accurate, then we would also have had plenty of single parent families at that time. But then, there is also no indication that the Kandyans were a bunch of socially mutant people either.

Besides, the Buddha's own family was a single parent family. According to Buddhist mythology, after Prince Siddharta left his family (mind you, without informing anyone), his wife Yasodhara and son Rahula were a single-parent family headed by Yasodhara. But then, there is also no record of Rahula growing up to be a tyrant because of his single parent background. In fact he became an arahat. So in the end, what really matters is how a child is brought up, not how many parents are living in a single household.

Thus single parent families are part of the lived reality of contemporary Sri Lanka. Even in families where both parents may live in the same household, one of them may very well be quite unfunctional due to a number of possible reasons. In such a context, the child's nurturing in positive terms depends on the other parent. To me, this seem like a single parent situation, where in fact both parents are located within the same household. If we count these cases too the picture of the single

parent situation in Sri Lanka will drastically change even further. So much for single parents.

Limitations of Middle Class Imagination

It should be reasonably clear that the historical and cultural amnesia many of us suffer from is the primary reason for the limitations of middle class imagination. It is through a rather limited and colonized cultural frame of reference that the past and the nature of the present is viewed and perceived. Moreover, the limited experience of the middle classes is imposed on both the past and on the larger contemporary reality in order to justify certain situations. Consider the following classic statement from the same rhetorical "reply" I quoted from above:

As to the inference that children are traumatised by their parent's sexual relations how many Sri Lankan parents even discuss sexual matters with their children, let alone make sexual advances to each other before the children's eyes.

Our parents do not discuss sexual matters with their children. To me that is part of the problem. It is perhaps due to this kind of naive cultural inhibitions that sex education in general has become such a problem in this country. But the notion that they do not engage in sex in front of their children is a wonderful manifestation of the middle class limited imagination as well as the general propensity of that class to impose their limited experiences of reality on other sections of the wider society.

Perhaps, in many middle class households, parents have separate rooms to have sex, shout at each other, beat each other, and engage in whatever else they may want to do away from the eyes of their children. Again this is an ideal situation, and in many instances within middle class circles, this may not occur on these very lines. But in any case, this ideal reality can not be duplicated and imposed on other sections of society. For instance, how many of us have visited those "terrible" places called "shanties". If you have, I would assume that you would have noticed that many of these places are not palaces. Many are single room dwellings, that is, one room for everything, including for the kids to sleep and parents to have sex, and drunken fathers to rape their wives. I would allow your imagination to imagine whether children can be traumatized under these circumstances or not. But at the same time, I would urge you not to impose your reality - such as the wonderfully designed houses you have with separate rooms for separate things - on others. It is an utterly vulgar practice, to say the least. Let us quote another line from the "reply":

If these intellectuals would come out of their textbook world for a while to observe....

True, some intellectuals are stuck in their Ivory Tower. Many others are out of that ivory tower and their text books and are "observing" the world as suggested above. The problem seems to be that the middle class preachers who usually give this kind of advice do not seem to practice it. If they do, the kind of wonderful fairy tales that are sometimes churned out in newspapers as authentic reality simply would not have happened. If that was the case, many of us could have spent our time engaged in some other meaningful activity than writing this kind of comment. ■