

Sri Lankan Normal

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The sign at Bandaranaike airport says ‘Welcome to the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka’. It is impossible not to think of Voltaire’s remark about the Holy Roman Empire, but that would be unfair. There does not seem to be any doubt about Sri Lanka being a republic, and the problem is not a democratic deficit but, if anything, the reverse. In particular, Sri Lanka’s agony can be traced to the legacy and consequences of the first-past-the-post, winner-takes-all Westminster system. It was Leonard Woolf – husband of Virginia and author of the brilliant *The Village in the Jungle* (which was dismissed by uncomprehending Bloomsbury colleagues incapable of empathizing with Sinhalese peasants) – who recognized that only a Swiss-style federal system would work in Sri Lanka. Woolf’s recommendations were ignored by the Labour Party, to which he was an advisor in the 1930s and 40s. Various governments of Sri Lanka have been trying to get back to something like a federal system ever since, only to be undermined by the extremists on either side.

The day we left Heathrow two men turned up at Kethesh Loganathan’s house in Colombo and shot him dead in front of his wife. It is not the LTTE’s style to claim responsibility, but no one was in any doubt that it was the Tamil Tigers who had done it. Loganathan joined a long line of distinguished Tamil leaders and intellectuals who dared to stand for an alternative to the Tigers’ all-or-nothing dream of independence achieved through the gun: Appapillai Amrithalingam (1989), Rajani Thiranagama (1989), Neelan Thiruchelvan (1999), Lakshman Kadirgamar (2005), and many, many more right back to Alfred Duraiappah, the Mayor of Jaffna, in 1975.

We stayed at the Galle Face, the oldest hotel in Colombo, with its unrivalled position on the seafront, swarms of staff, lists on the walls of celebrities who stayed there in the old days, and bust of Arthur C. Clarke in the lobby (he played Woolf in the Sri Lankan film of *The Village in the Jungle*). It also has a magnificent 30-metre sea-water swimming pool. As you swim to and fro, you can see a cement tower, two machine-gun emplacements at the top, guarding the sea approach to the Indian High Commission. As our taxi approached the entrance to the hotel, it was stopped so that a peon could check underneath for explosives.

On our first day in Colombo we walked to the National Museum along Ananda Coomaraswamy Avenue. An hour and a half after we passed the spot, the LTTE detonated a three-wheeler full of explosives as the Pakistani High Commissioner drove by. (Pakistan has supported the Sri Lankan government with supplies of weapons throughout the last twenty years; there is also apparently a counter theory that the Tigers were aiming for a government minister and got the wrong motorcade.) The High Commissioner survived but four of the soldiers guarding him and three bystanders died. We were inside the Museum and it was pouring with rain, so we heard nothing. Friends told us about it that evening and there was a diagram in the paper the next day. The security services cleaned up in a matter of hours. Apparently Colombo can sustain two bomb blasts a day and still carry on functioning ‘as normal’. Sri Lankans have learned to live with terror and are disappointed if foreign visitors are put off by headlines about bombs in Colombo and violence in the north and east.

The following evening I gave a talk on the causes of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal at a public meeting in the International Centre for Ethnic Studies. (Despite some similarities in the situations of the two countries, Nepal is still fortunate not to have the tradition of political assassination, going back to Prime Minister Bandaranaike's slaying by a Buddhist monk in 1959, that has helped to keep Sri Lankan politics sharply polarized.) Among the usual random questions, the most significant response from the audience – reading the situation through their own experiences – was that I sounded sympathetic to the Maoists. Evidently anything short of condemning insurgents as terrorists, any attempt to look at causes and conditions, counts as providing succour to the enemy.

And indeed the English-language newspapers in Sri Lanka provide space to an amazing variety of views, including the most chauvinist. It is chilling to see how hostile the average Sinhala reader is to foreign agencies and to local NGOs, assuming them all to be sell-outs to Tamil interests. Dark accusations are believed in all seriousness about the Norwegians cooperating with the Tigers to settle Tamils, who were supposed to be repatriated from the hill country to India, in order to establish a Tamil bloc in the north-east of the country.

Kandy is a peaceful hill town, the heart of Sinhala culture with its Temple of the Buddha's Tooth. It was hard to look out over the valley at night and imagine fierce battles raging the other side of the mountains as the Sri Lankan army tried to dislodge the Tigers from their positions around Trincomalee in the east and the Tigers sacrificed many young lives in an attempt to recapture Jaffna in the north. During a break in the conference I was attending, I caught on television incredible scenes of an anti-war meeting in Lipton Circus, Colombo. The meeting had been preceded by a march, led by representatives of all the main faiths of the country, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. Some extreme Buddhist monks turned up in order to disrupt the meeting. The television showed scenes of the monks being manhandled by the supporters of the meeting. This was shocking several times over and would have been unthinkable in other Theravada Buddhist countries such as Thailand: shocking that monks should attempt this kind of physical political action (the first Buddhist precept is to avoid harming other living beings and monks are meant to maintain controlled decorum at all times – there is no tradition of monastic martial arts as in China or Japan), shocking because there seemed to be no taboo on laymen responding in kind to the monks with fisticuffs, pushing, and shoving, and shocking finally because – in a deeply and seriously Buddhist country – those watching with me were not shocked at all, but seemed to treat it as an everyday matter of only mild interest. Cognitively, I know that it is naïve to assume that Buddhism is somehow exempt from the temptations of political engagement and violence that have engulfed the adherents other religions, or to assume that most monks live up to the saintly stereotype; affectively, it is hard to break the association of Buddhism and non-violence.

On 16th August V. Anandasangaree, the president of TULF, one of the Tamil parliamentary parties, wrote an open letter pleading with the JVP (which is ideologically close to the extremist monks) to at least consider the possibility of political reform, of allowing some form of autonomy to the Tamil regions, in order to preserve the unity of the country. His long article had a particular poignancy because, as he acknowledged, the Tigers could assassinate him at any moment. Needless to say, the JVP rejected his call for a dialogue.

The south appears relatively prosperous. Apart from a few roadblocks, at which only the occasional car or van is stopped, there are no signs of conflict. Along

the coast, one sees numerous destroyed houses, but these are leftovers of the tsunami and everywhere building is going on. (Hambantota, where Leonard Woolf lived, was one of the worst-affected districts.) In many places little estates of identikit houses can be seen, set back from the sea, with a sign stating that they were built with aid from Italy, Spain, or France.

On August 14th the Sri Lankan airforce had bombed what the Tigers claimed was an orphanage and girls' hostel, killing at least 19 (the Tigers claim 61) and injuring over 100. The newspapers reported the government view that it was a training centre for the Tigers' child soldiers.

There is some small comfort to be taken in the fact that, despite the hostilities, there is, I was told, no chance of a repeat of the anti-Tamil pogroms of 1983 which pushed the country into the present downward spiral of violence. (600,000 Tamils, probably at least a third of all the Tamils in the country, actually live outside the so-called Tamil areas.) But meanwhile, in the east of the country, some elements of the security forces are allegedly operating a Tiger-type assassination policy, systematically removing any community or business leaders who might provide a focus for opposition. While we were there, arguing was still going on about who executed 16 Tamils and 1 Muslim working for the French aid agency, Action contre la Faim, in Muttur, just south of Trincomalee.

There was a time when shrines such as Kataragama were held up as symbols of religious and ethnic unity. The main god is Hindu (Kataragama = Skandha, the son of Shiva), but his temple is surrounded by Buddhist sacred symbols, and there is a mosque within the grounds. All Sri Lankans, regardless of faith, come on pilgrimage seeking his favour. President Rajapakse himself visited recently. Unfortunately it would appear that these kinds of shared symbols and religious spaces can coexist with segregated schooling and walled-off mindsets.

Meanwhile tourism continues, perhaps not at the level that it might or of planners' dreams, but continues none the less (no tourist has ever been targeted by the Tigers in more than twenty years of war, and around 400,000 visit every year). Hotels are far from empty, even in the monsoon. On beaches in the south and west of the country it is possible to surf, snorkle, sunbathe, admire the sunset through the palm trees, and visit Buddhist temples, as if everything were normal.