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By Charles Sarvan

K. M de Silva, *The Island Story: A Short History of Sri Lanka*, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 2017: “*Sri Lanka in the first few centuries after the early settlement was a multi-racial, multi-ethnic society: a conception which emphasises harmony and a spirit of live and let live (K. M. de Silva, op. cit., page 13)*”

It's said that fools rush in where the wise fear even to walk. I tiptoe hesitantly, conscious that I am no historian (my discipline was Literature) while the author is perhaps the most eminent of Sri Lankan historians writing in English. The hope is that what I write will be taken as a layman's perspective and contribution to discussion.

I begin by being pedantic: one wishes the title had had the indefinite article “an”, rather than the definite article with the (here undoubtedly unintended) implication of authority and singleness that the latter carries. The word “story” is embedded in “*History*” and there are several versions, varying narratives. History, over time and the world, has proved to be a much discussed, contested, field. Objectivity in History is difficult, if not impossible: see, for example, *History the Betrayer* by E. H. Dance. So too, one regrets the lack of scrupulous qualification in statements such as, “Sri Lanka is a Buddhist society” (p. xvi), rather than, for example, “Sri Lanka is overwhelmingly a Buddhist society” – Buddhist in public and pious protestation, if not in practice. Continuing to cavil, I note the author uses the word “colonial” (from the Latin ‘*colonia*’ meaning settlement) when what's meant is “imperial”. Of course, the author knows this but the accidental imprecision and the resulting misnomer will strengthen the lack of distinction between “colonialism” and “imperialism”, particularly since someone of his reputation uses it. (Now we have neo-imperialism, though some right-wing groups in the West and elsewhere fear that the wave of migrants “flooding in” will colonise and dispossess them, even as they, in some instances, dispossessed the autochthonous.) The use of “India” and

“South India” seems to me, in some contexts, to be an anachronism: I am reminded of the assertion once made by a friend talking about the African slave-trade: “We never sold our fellow Africans into slavery”. Seeing my surprise, he clarified that neither the term nor the concept “Africa” then existed! Members of one (African) tribe sold foreigners, that is, those from other (African) tribes. So too, India as it exists and is known today simply did not exist. (Unwittingly, the reign of Parakramabahu is described as being “the Indian summer of Sinhalese greatness”: page 19). Writing about the Pandyan, Professor de Silva comments that “not all the Sinhalese rulers of this period were willing to accept the position and status” of a satellite state of “Tamil power in South India” (p. 24). I think the Pandyan saw themselves as Pandyan, and not as Tamil. In fact, they fought against other entities now seen as “Tamil”. Similarly, it seems to me, a non-Historian, that there wasn’t then an overwhelming “Sinhalese” consciousness. For example, low-country Sinhalese joined Western powers (the Portuguese, the Dutch and finally the British) in their attacks on the Kandyan kingdom. ‘The Great Kandyan Uprising’ of 1817 - 1818 against British imperialism was put down with help from low-county Sinhalese. (The ancestors of Mr S W R D Bandaranaike - now seen as one of the fathers of Sri Lankan ethno-religious nationalism – were recognised and rewarded by the British for their active collaboration.)

In the struggle between Sinhalese Dutthagamini and Tamil Elara (so falsely and injuriously celebrated in the *Mahavamsa*) there were “large reserves of support for Elara among the Sinhalese” (de Silva, page 12), and his victory was not, as it is now seen, one of Aryan triumph over the Dravidians. (Interestingly, it was the Tamil rulers who were known as *Arya Chakravartis*: page 26. “Arya” meant noble or excellent.)

There seems not to have been then, as now, an overriding Sinhalese consciousness: for example, Dravidian assistance was called upon to settle differences within the Island (page 20). Nor did the Island hesitate to send troops to (what is now known as) India: see page 15. These and other statements are likely to arouse the ire of Sinhalese nationalists (racists invariably describe themselves as “nationalists”). Nor will comments such as the following endear him to them: “In 1739 the dynasty established by Vimala Dharma Suriya became extinct in the male line, and the South Indian Nayakkar dynasty came to the Kandyan throne by virtue of marriage alliances with the ruling house in Kandy” (p. 44). But this did not lead to any substantial change because the Nayakkars “became more Kandyan than the Kandyans”. Under their patronage, there was a great Buddhist revival “and this had its influence on the low country as well” (ibid).

About one-third of the book consists of events leading up to the internecine conflict, an ugly war in a beautiful island – “beautiful” geographically. It is now almost a cliché that History is written, preserved and passed down by the victors. (And not only through history books but also through other media such as fiction, orally transmitted stories, songs and films.) Secondly, there is the question of objectivity, something easier for the scientist to achieve than for those in the Humanities. As Heidegger commented, even objectivity is judged by a subjective self. (I am aware, and fully accept, that I’m no exception.) Yet another human trait is that we prefer, and are more comfortable with, clear and simple categories: black and white; bad and good. Varying shades of grey are problematic, even vexing. I must say I found this third part of the book a disappointment.

Professor de Silva writes (pp. 99-100) that separatist agitation began with peaceful political pressure in the mid-1950s. The phrase, “separatist agitation” occurs elsewhere as well in the book but, far from wanting separation, Tamils for long rejected even federalism. As I wrote in Volume 2 of my *Public Writings on Sri Lanka* (page 59): “In 1952, the Kankesanthurai parliamentary seat was contested by

Chelvanayagam, as a member of the Federal Party. He was comfortably defeated *by a U.N.P. candidate.*” See also, *op. cit.*, page 58: “Even after the trauma of Standardisation (“racial” quota) in relation to University admission beginning in 1971, and the Draft Constitution of 1972, the All Ceylon Tamil Conference declared, ‘Our children and our children’s children should be able to say, with one voice, Lanka is our great motherland, and we are one people from shore to shore. We speak two noble languages, but with one voice’”.

The author writes of “the pathology of separation” (p. 137). The word “pathology” is derived from “disease” but there’s a failure to ‘connect the dots’ he himself has provided; a failure to perceive cause and effect. I cite a few of the former. The language policy proclaimed prior to independence was, post-independence, “unilaterally repudiated” (p. 105). The new constitution of 1972 was “the consolidation of the linguistic nationalism that had dominated Sri Lankan politics since 1956” (p. 108). The “landmark general election of 1956 was the beginning of Sri Lanka’s fall from grace. Ethnic harmony was replaced by ethnic conflict” (p. 105), marked by a succession of riots. (Riots imply rioters but there’s no need to specify who the rioters were and who the victims.) The introduction of a racial quota in the 1970s meant that “academic ability *per se* no longer sufficed to ensure entry to the university” (p. 113). ‘Affirmative action’ is usually understood as measures taken to help minority, disadvantaged, groups. But in Sri Lanka, it means further favouring the majority and disadvantaging minority groups: see, page 114.

As William Ralph Inge (1860-1954; Professor of Divinity, Cambridge; Dean of St Paul’s) commented, historians have a power which not even God has: that of altering the past. The past (which conditions the present and shapes the future) is not inviolate; can be misinterpreted, distorted. In large part, this is because the majority of us, human beings, believe what we wish and want to believe. One could say; First comes the conviction – however vague or concrete – and then the (alleged) evidence.

Paradoxical though it may be, History is also preserved (or created) by what is *not* written. Not being recorded, people are not reminded; what’s not reminded is forgotten, and soon becomes ‘never-to-have-happened’. Silence also writes History. Sometimes, the omission is accidental (as I think with Professor de Silva) or perhaps dictated to by the exigencies of space. An event that took place at the end of May 1981, one of the worst examples of ethnic biblioclasm of the 20th century, is not mentioned. The Jaffna Library, housing over 95,000 manuscripts, including texts on palm leaves - unique; irreplaceable - was burnt down. (More recently, the so-called Islamic Caliphate or ISIS carried out acts of cultural barbarism.) The Romantic poet, Heinrich Heine (Jewish-German; 1797-1856) wrote that those who burn books today will burn human beings tomorrow. It took several decades for Heine’s warning to come true but in Sri Lanka it was swifter, May/June 1981 being followed by ‘Black July 1983’. (By coincidence, I write this in May, the month which saw the burning down of the Library and, almost three decades later, the end of the war.)

‘Black July’, a major, horrific, event for the Tamils is referred to as “the anti-Tamil riots of 1983” (p. 124): it was a pogrom and not a “riot”. (In this context, I recommend *Worse Than War* by Professor David Goldhagen who taught Political Science at Harvard University for many years.) Though some others have minimised the nightmare that was ‘Black July’; glossed it over or used the glib expressions - “We must move on” - I believe this is not the intention of Professor de Silva. Much has been written about the intense hatred and resulting horror but I

turn to a complete outsider, Shiva Naipaul: 1945-1985; younger brother of the famous V. S. Naipaul. In an article on him titled, 'Ever a stranger: Shiva Naipaul in Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia and Sri Lanka', I wrote:

Arriving shortly after the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983, Naipaul was horrified and revolted by what he learnt: a young boy hacked to "limbless death". Murderers, looters and incendiaries "often had to rely on the information derived from the electoral registers... Their blood-lust was, in effect, regulated by the bureaucratic endeavours of the Civil Service. Before the axes could be wielded, before the petrol bombs could be thrown, before the pillaging could begin, a little paperwork was necessary". Here, as elsewhere, the writer's anger and indignation pulse beneath the urbane, seemingly detached, ironic tone. Of two Tamil sisters, aged about eleven and eighteen, the younger one has her head chopped off; the elder one is stripped naked, and when "there were no more volunteers, when there was nothing worth the violating, petrol was poured over the two bodies", and they were set alight. As a critic has commented, group-animosity was symbolic for Naipaul of the hatred that arises when a people's otherness isn't freely granted. Impeccably wrought and morally charged, Naipaul's essays are a testament to his generous humaneness (*Public Writings on Sri Lanka*, Volume 111, pages 19-20).

Immediately after July 1983, Tamils occupied the moral high-ground and there was international outrage on their behalf, but the actions of the Tigers quickly turned strong sympathy to acute antipathy.

Reading about the Punic Wars, I form the (erroneous?) impression that however brilliant and daring a general Hannibal was, his defeat by Rome was inevitable. And I wonder if there's a parallel. I quote from my 'A "great" military victory?' (*Sunday Leader*, 25 October 2009):

"It is thought that, at their height, the Tigers perhaps numbered 30,000. Towards the end, down to a few thousand (finally, a few hundred), they faced an army of (again, perhaps) 250,000. The Tigers did not have jets and helicopters. Their mono, propeller, planes were slow and clumsy, and of no real military value. Rejected by foreign governments, the Tigers were as isolated internationally as they were totally surrounded in geographic and military terms. In contrast, the government of Sri Lanka received help and advice from several countries, even from those states in competition with, and suspicious of, each other. The Taliban fight in mountainous, inaccessible, terrain, while the Tigers occupied flat land, albeit forested. Sri Lanka being an island (and the government of the nearest country, India, implacably hostile), the LTTE did not have borders over which they could easily slip, regroup, recover and return to continue the struggle. The wonder is not that the government eventually won but that it took so long for final victory to be achieved."

For this phase of the war, I would suggest Paul Moorcraft ^[1]'s '*Total Destruction of the Tamil Tigers: The Rare Victory of Sri Lanka's Long War* ^[2]', 2012. Professor Moorcraft has written several books on recent wars. His *Total Destruction* is short but contains a wealth of information and detail. The author has read on Sri Lanka, visited sites, and conducted interviews including with army commanders, the Permanent Secretary ^[3] (Defence), the President ^[4], Kumaran Pathmanathan ^[5] ("K.P."), Colonel Karuna ^[6] and others: see, Sarvan, Colombo Telegraph, 9 June 2013.

For a study published in 2017, *Island Story* makes no mention of the final phase of the war, and the maiming and killing of thousands of children, women and men. The Tigers had corralled civilians, desperately hoping their presence would deter the army. Having set out as liberators, they ended as those willing to sacrifice their own on a calculation that was at once selfish and cruel. (No doubt, some will be incensed at me for this statement but those who lack the honesty and courage to acknowledge mistakes, crimes and "sins" have no moral right to criticise and condemn others.) The Tigers' major miscalculation on the one hand, and the army's "Go to hell" policy on the other led to a carnage massive in scale and pitiful in nature, succinctly conveyed in this New York Times cartoon reproduced below. Words from the poem, 'Elegy written in a country churchyard' come to mind: to wade through slaughter [to victory] and "shut the gates of mercy on mankind".

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COMMENTARY LETTERS

