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Book Review: Public Writings on Sri Lanka- Vol. II By Charles Sarvan

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For quite sometime, Sri Lanka has been in the news for all the wrong reasons with international criticism over large scale human rights violations in the war with the LTTE. A report by Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) that has accused Rajapakse government of failing to investigate the alleged war crimes as also a resolution sponsored by US demanding an international probe is being considered very shortyly in the United Nations.

It is in this context that the book “Public Writings on Sri Lanka” by Pro. Charles Sarvan should be read not only by those concerned about or interested in Sri Lanka as is mentioned at the back of the book but all by all those dealing generally with Human Rights violations all over the world.

What is witnessed now in Sri Lanka is the “victor’s justice” and it is sad that the decimation of Tigers (LTTE) has not brought in justice, peace or prosperity for the Tamils.

The book is in two parts-. The first part is a reprint of the subject in Vol. I of the book with minor corrections. This would itself form a separate book as it gives a full historical and cultural back ground to the ethnic conflict-the deep seated and irrational fear of the majority community, the Sinhallas.

A reference is made to the Mahawamsa which is regarded as the collective conscious and as the author puts it even more powerfully the “Sinhala unconscious.”

An interesting episode in Mahawamsa is quoted where King Dutugeumunu, having caused the destruction of a great many lives, was concerned he would not attain nirvana. Thereupon the Buddhist monks comforted him, saying that he had killed only one and a half men-the one was a Buddhist and the other only on the path to becoming a Buddhist. The others who died, being non Buddhists were but animals! (page 26)

The author was appalled that human beings can be seen and treated as if they were animals. This in my view explains the mind set of some and not all of the Sri Lankan tragedy.

In a later part of the book (page 141), a reference is again made to the famous conflict between Dutugemunu-Elara conflict. He says- “. . . To think of the conflict as one between Sinhalese and Tamil is to read the distant, dim and unreadable past through the consciousness of later times. It is to impose categories on the conflict that did not exist (then).

There are many more nuggets in the chapter on Anomy that covers almost half the book and should be read by those who want to understand the present ethnic problem in Sri Lanka.

In tracing the “imperial legacy” in Sri Lanka, Professor Sarvan asserts that foreign intervention had arrested the indigenous historical development of Sri Lanka. Left alone according to him, the different ethnic groups would have fought, but over the centuries would have reached an accommodation. It occurs to me that there was a ‘working harmony’ until the advent of S.W.R.D Bandaranaike who with a stroke of the pen most Tamils were “rendered official illiterates”

At another point, in discussing about the emergence of the Tigers, the author asks much before the LTTE was vanquished the question- Given the past record, what confidence can the Tamils have that justice will prevail if the Tigers are eliminated? What is pondered by Tamils then was “if despite the Tigers, the majority of Sinhalese are unwilling to extend justice and equality, why should they when the Tamils are defenceless? Will it not be yet again a case of ‘woe to the vanquished’? The author once asked a Sinhala friend as to what would happen if the Tigers are eliminated and the friend unhesitatingly replied ‘Subordination’!

To me, it looks that the Rajapakse government is unlikely at anytime time to relent and give what is due to the Tamils.

The chapter on anomy is followed by articles mostly published but updated in Sunday Leader, Colombo between 2009 and 2012. Each of the articles would call for an extensive discussion on the ideas thrown up by the author. For want of space I would restrict myself to a few.

There is an interesting quote of a famous journalist Sivanandan on the LTTE and it is worth quoting in full- He said “Their degeneration began relatively early . . . Instead of winning over people who disagree with them, they wiped them out. The Tigers have begun to alienate the Tamil population and gradually ceased having the support of the whole international community. Unlike resistance movements

elsewhere, the Tigers were politically underdeveloped. Weaponry was in command, not politics. This was a critical weakness and it created conditions for the final defeat in 2009.” (Page 104). How true!

On the final days of the war when thousands of civilians were massacred the author has to say this. (Page 107) The Tigers were completely and tightly encircled and their doom was certain. A little patience would have avoided needless and extreme civilian suffering and death. The haste to conclude the war had a political motive rather than a military or strategic one. Compassion and humanity were callously and casually thrown aside in a Machiavellian calculation of propaganda potential leading to electoral gain.”

It is a pity that India was a silent spectator to this mindless killing and one is not surprised that the issue is coming up again and again in the United Nations.

One chapter on Ben Bavnick’s diary of the war years should be read by all who were associated or who were interested in the ethnic strife that engulfed Sri Lanka like a tsunami from July 1983 onwards. (Page 160). The Diary written during brutal conflict-times says Professor Sarvan that he found it difficult to read more than a few pages at a time. He says that Like Shakespeares Macbeth, he felt that he had eaten too full of horror and tragedy.

In the end, I would again quote Professor Sarvan who says that Sri Lanka’s present is marked by irrationality, hatred and violence; the future is uncertain. He hopes and prays that just as Buddha turned Hariti(goddess of anomy and destruction) into the goddess of peace and harmony by making her realise the suffering and tragedy she causes, so it may come to pass in Sri Lanka too!

Professor Charles Ponnuthurai Sarvan, holds a PhD in Philosophy from the University of London. Having taught in London, Nigeria, Zambia, the Middle East and Germany, he has now retired and settled down in Germany.

(Review by Dr. S.Chandrasekharan- The book is not available freely in the open bookshops. Perhaps the publishers could be contacted.)

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