

Travels in a Militarised Society – Part II

By Prasanna Ratnayake

Again Boralla

I do not remember how many times I crossed the Boralla Junction in my life but I do know that this relatively small area of less than two square kilometres has been a kind of cooking pot of much Sri Lankan culture, politics and intellectual life. When I pass the Boralla Cemetery, my mind goes back to many small incidents and key moments in Sri Lanka's post-Independence history. I don't have a chronological or complete way to describe these moments, but here are some bullet point recollections of a few incidents:

- In the late '50s and early '60s, an assortment of people interested in the arts, culture and contemporary politics called itself Appé Kattiya (Our Group). One of the main personalities in this group was Sugathapala de Silva, a novelist, theatre producer and translator of Pirandello, Ionesco and Peter Weiss. Appé Kattiya discussions also considered Sartre, Camus, Beckett and other contemporary cultural innovators. Amongst the notable people who sometimes came to join this group was Anton Balasingham, later to become known for his ideological work on behalf to the Tamil struggle. Other Sri Lankan bohemians of the '60s included Cyril B. Perera, GW Surendra, Sumana Alokabandara and Ralex Ranasinghe. The group had several places they would meet, one of which was the Boralla Cemetery. There was no formal support or organisation, just a group of friends who would meet sometimes for a glass of beer and a chat about the events and ideas that interested them. They talked a lot about Existentialism. They were educated middle class professionals: clerks, government servants, accountants and bookkeepers, as well as artists, musicians, writers and other cultural figures. They didn't only chat. In this immediate post-Independence period, they were responsible for major contributions to the cultural life of the country with their productions and other works, opening doors to international influences and debates.
- Many of Appé Kattiya's productions were staged in the nearby theatre of the YMBA (Young Men's Buddhist Association). The theatre still exists but is now devoted to more localised performances. The main YMBA building has been levelled and replaced by a huge shopping complex.
- When the 1971 JVP Southern insurgency erupted, the government responded by killing nearly 20,000 people and putting key leaders into the Weilikade and Magazine prisons in Boralla between 1971 and 1977. Many of these men first spent their time there analysing and criticising themselves for the failures of their tactics and philosophy. Later they studied the tenets and strategies of the Latin American revolutions, the Civil Rights movements, the Maoists, the Trotskyites and other political groups of the time. This period of study and discussion contributed greatly to the development of Sri Lankan intellectual discourses and many of those who survived their incarceration later became leading academics, journalists and social activists.
- On the eve of the 1983 Riots, after the LTTE had killed thirteen SL Army soldiers in the North, the government staged a common funeral for them in the Boralla Cemetery. That night State television broadcast a speech by the President, JR Jayawardene. A man educated in the old Oxbridge tradition, JR's rhetoric was crafted to rouse the ire of his people. It was his Mark Antony moment and a rallying cry for Sinhala nationalists. Two days later, on 25th July, inside the Weilikade prison, the Sinhala prisoners massacred many of the Tamil political prisoners. Five days later there was a second similar massacre in the same prison. Needless to say, in both instances, the Sinhala guards did not intervene. From this time onwards, the country erupted in communal violence. The slaughter had begun.

- Today at the Boralla Cemetery roundabout, the little area around the huge tree in the centre is sponsored and maintained by the All-Island Buddhist Conference. At each of four corners there are yellow boards stating the key Buddhist values: tolerance, kindness.... When you take a left turn off the roundabout, the road you are on is Buddhhaloka Mawatha (Light of Buddha Road). Still thinking about 1983, I remember Sinha Rathanthunga's book, *The Politics of Terrorism*, in which he documented how the Riots were organised and conducted by government ministers and a leading Buddhist monk, whom he names. He was not the only one to point out who had been responsible; similar conclusions were offered in publications of the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), the Sansoni Commission and many other investigations and reports. I do not know that there was any legal process to convict or reprimand this monk, who lives here on Light of Buddha Road. In fact, he is currently on several Presidential Commissions, so evidently he has not experienced any difficulties as a result of his services to the nation in the early '80s.
- Sinhala nationalism escalated following the time of terror and was encouraged and implemented by the government, which laid down certain cultural precepts: classical music and songs were good, local popular songs were impure and therefore not good. Nonetheless, HR Jothipala, who was immensely popular and could sing perfect Hindi, Tamil or Sinhala melodies, recorded many thousands of songs that were circulated widely on LPs, film soundtracks and cassettes, performed at public concerts and occasionally broadcast on commercial radio. He was so adored that on more than one occasion a group of lady fans abducted him and he had to summon help to escape. When he died of a heart attack in the late '80s, people came from all over the country to attend his funeral, the biggest that had ever been held in Colombo. At the time, Sarath Amunugama, who had a French academic background, wrote an article describing HR Jothipala as a cultural icon due to his enormous impact and his deep knowledge of Sri Lankan sentiments and values. The Sinhala academics were very upset by this but the confrontation initiated the first serious discussions of popular culture and politics in the country. For better or for worse, this became known as The Cemetery Debate.
- The Boralla Cemetery backs onto the Colombo Golf Club, an elegant and venerable colonial institution. On 13th November 1990, the founder and iconic JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera was gunned down in the narrow area between the cemetery and the golf club. Ironically, one of the witnesses of the killing, a man who worked as a photographer for the Security Forces, was actually a JVP spy.
- After the dark period of the late '80s – with its killings, abductions, disappearances and more – in the early '90s a newspaper was started called *Lakdiva* (Island of Sri Lanka) inside the Boralla junction supermarket run by moderate JVP, ex-JVP and some independent journalists and writers. Opposite this, on Eliot Place, was the VIBHAVI Centre for Alternative Culture where we cultural grasshoppers hung out. The two groups got together from time to time to share events like films or just engage in discussions.

These recollections are still with me during my lunch of Mihiri bath kadé (rice and curry), particularly while having a cigarette to conclude the meal. I am also keeping an eye open as smoking a cigarette in public is now illegal; though being kidnapped and disappearing in a white van or dying in a bomb blast can happen at any time – and is, of course, no problem.

Strolling along Ward Place, Colombo —

It is 10th December 2007, Human Rights Day. I am taking a stroll along Ward Place from Boralla to Lipton Circus. To either side of me are new buildings that have been erected in the past 20-30 years. I am remembering my senior colleague, Reginald Mendies. Reg lost his hand reaching up to catch a bomb and protect the comrades ranked behind him during the mid-'50s language policy confrontations.

During the '90s he told me many stories about the geopolitical demographics of Boralla. He even had stories of individual buildings. What had happened here was this: in 1958 and 1983, thousands of Tamils of the area had to flee in a great rush to save their lives. Many were small traders who ran their businesses from street stalls or peddled their goods along the pavements. When they had to leave, they asked their Sinhala neighbours to safeguard their property until they would return to reclaim it and take up their normal lives again. This is not what happened. Their neighbours agreed and watched the exodus. Some Sinhala residents of Boralla took over these abandoned businesses and, having good connections and no political or ethnic problems, prospered to such an extent that many are now millionaires and leading figures in the Sinhala national project. When some of these Tamil owners returned, they found that most of their houses were gone. New buildings have gone up in which their former friends now run major businesses build up from the goods and properties inherited from their erstwhile neighbours.

At the junction of Kinsey Road, I waited to cross on the red light. On my right was the old OCIC Cinema Society, which was run for 25 years by Father Ernest Poruthota. From here some of our talented directors emerged: Asoka Handagama and Prasanna Vithanage. On the road to my left the painting by Chandraguptha Thenuwara which honours the spot where the LTTE killed Nelan Thiruchelvam. Set back from the street, ICES, the organisation he founded which continues to this day as a centre of culture, law and research. This junction is of importance to me personally: on the right the place where I saw and learned the visual and aesthetic discourses of cinema; on my left the site of work by Regi Siriwardene and many others that contributed so much to our awareness and our study of human rights, political and anthropological social science and ethnic realities. Though in time it became an élite place, it also gave many unprivileged members of our generation, little grasshoppers like me, the intellectual tools to analyse and see into the depths of our society and its history.

I continue my strolling monologue as I pass the red gateposts of a living monument of Sri Lanka history. No one is in the little guard hut. This is the home of former president JR Jayawardene, the man who introduced the executive presidency and the 'open economy'. Of course, I have my own criticism of both these policies; but for the moment what I am thinking about is the way each character that followed JR in the top job claimed in advance that they would sort out the abuses of this constitutional dictatorship. Once in post, each one in reality expanded the definition and the practices of what such an Executive President could do.

In 2008 Sri Lanka celebrates 60 years of independence from the British. Of these 60 years, half have been consumed by civil wars; North and South, we have specialised in killing each other. Many people excuse this distortion of national development by pointing to JR's constitution as the source of these problems. Yes, the executive presidency was a mistake, the 'open economy' another error; but the man is long since dead, there have been plenty of years to correct the problems, why should we still blame him for the horrors of the present? These claims that it is all JR's fault are used to cover up the wilful suspension of human rights, collective sanity and social justice – the impunity with which our society is immolating itself.

Next on my little walk, I pass the Monitoring Mission, the institution set up to keep an eye on the Cease Fire and ensure that there was enough calm for the country to recover from the previous 20 years of hell and to strive for a more equitable future. Fifteen or twenty metres ahead of me I can see some police and army guys being agitated in the middle of the road. I don't know what's going on but take off my MP3 player, on which I was listening to the Somali singer K'Naan, and hesitate a bit to see if I can figure it out. I ask a policeman if any incident has occurred. "No, nothing important. The Security Forces are trying to calm down some students demonstrating in front of the University Grant Commission." As I approach I see that a huge blue Leyland police truck has been positioned to block the main road. I hadn't noticed until this moment that there had been no traffic on the road. My eyes begin to weep from the teargas spreading through the air. As I turn away towards the McCarthy

Hospital to take a detour and escape the suffocating gas, I can hear the dull thud of rubber bullets. I am trying to get to Odel.

Cultural Iconography: Odel Present and Past

I enter Odel from the car park side with echoes of the student protest and the rubber bullets in my ears. I wet a hankie with my water bottle and wipe the tears from my eyes. Odel is bedecked with pre-Christmas colours: this old white colonial mansion is decorated with classy, elegant peacock coloured angels, birds and fairy lights. The day is hot as usual. As I cross the threshold, a soft mist of water from above the door baptises me; a gentle moment of luxury courtesy of the management. Then, less gently, the private security guards search my bag. I might be carrying a bomb! Inside, to the musak of Christmas carols, I float through the international world of fashion and opulence: Hugo Boss so handsome, Naomi Campbell on the catwalk, Ralph Lauren from top to toe, perfumes including special fragrances for men, Lush soaps for lush ladies, a Sushi bar, French and Italian coffees, wines from anywhere on earth, jewellery glittering with the fabled gems of our land... And so on. I am on another planet, the planet of elegance and beauty where I can be wrapped in aromatic softness, cuddled by dreams that circle the globe promising they can come true... if ... if ...

I run into a couple of my NGO friends. They have recently got married and are setting up their own little business. They are cheerful, optimistic, smiling a lot. In my head I hear Paul Simon singing: "...why don't we get together and call ourselves an institute".

Suddenly there's a politician hanging around in my fantasy world. I cannot remember which party he is in now since he, like others, is a floor-crosser. His two hefty body guards have immaculate white shirts, mobile phones and pistols displayed on their belts. I am not floating any more. Behind and beneath the sweet smells and seductive sights, there is something else.

Yes, this perfect fantasy world revolves 360 degrees and I am back twenty years. Twenty years ago this beautiful mansion was a Special Forces camp. Many university students and youth from Colombo and the surrounding areas who were suspected of being JVP or anti-state activists were brought here. Most of them never came home again. Everyone knew what was going on in here and avoided the place not to hear the sounds. I cannot say how many young corpses are buried beneath this beautiful Odel of which we are so proud, where we can be part of the proper international commercial world.

Our present Minister for the Environment, Champika Ranawaka, a JHU parliamentarian, is the man who defends all the necessary repressions of the present time, the man who protects us from the neo-imperialism of foreign NGOs and governments who moan about human rights. He also has an interesting history associated with this place. I cannot remember which torture camp he was taken to after being picked up in Boralla in September 1989, either the one here at Odel or the one at Colombo University. He was held for three months. After this he published a series of articles, entitled *Amusabonaka Willangula*, about his experience in *Divaina's* Wednesday Supplement. *Amusabonaka* refers to the ancient practice of putting corpses unburied and uncremated into cemetery areas where they would be dealt with by birds and animals of prey. *Willangula* are handcuffs. During his time in the torture camp he had felt like a handcuffed, abandoned body dumped in a place where he was being devoured. In 1992 several of his colleagues were arrested again. They were suspected of being involved in plans for a coup against President Premadasa. An NGO called the Movement for Defence Democratic Rights (MDDR) provided the legal means to release them from goal.

In a context in which every twenty-four hours, in the North, South, Central, East and West of Sri Lanka, several people are killed by aerial bombardments, claymore bombs, artillery shells, hand grenades, suicide bombers and a world-class catalogue of different bullets; I am happy to learn that our Minister of the Environment is deeply concerned to do something about Sri Lanka's carbon footprint.

Although our Minister explains that it is urgent to defeat terrorism in order to avoid this danger to the planet's health; what I wonder is whether the human footprint will disappear before we manage to get rid of the carbon footprint.

These thoughts, these quicksands of the past and the present, make me forget shopping and want to get out of Odel. As I reach the road, I see the students who have been beaten, clinging to the iron railings, still unable to see and trying to get the teargas out of their lungs. So, on this Human Rights Day, 10th December, this is the government's gift. Ironically, these same students' union is allied with the JVP, whose parliamentarians are allied with the government, enjoying the luxuries of power and privilege and denying vehemently that there are any human rights issues of concern in Sri Lanka. My mind is disoriented. I don't know how to understand this: in the second JVP uprising of the late '80s and early '90s, they lost 60,000 people. They in turn killed more 6,577 of their adversaries. During this time, they were dependent on Amnesty International, which brought their plight to the attention of the world and put much effort into protecting their human rights. Amnesty's support for the JVP was so effective that in 1991 Defence Minister Ranjan Wijerathne called Amnesty a terrorist organisation, a wolf in lamb's clothing out to demonise Sri Lankans. Now the JVP are partners of the government by day and champions of 'the people' by night. This is the strange choreography of opportunism, of those who have power without responsibility. They call themselves Marxist but they are Mask-ist. Not only do they deny that there are any human rights problems in Sri Lanka, but they are the ones now who loudly accuse Amnesty of siding with the LTTE and ignoring that organisation's violations.

It is dusk now. I am surrounded by the noise of vehicles, each harshly bleating its aggressive presence. On both sides of the road there are weary soldiers every ten metres. They have stood here all day in this hot, dusty, noisy, polluted place, without even a break to pee. The coral and pink sunset is fading and the shadows of the trees begin to weave the darkness of night. In the midst of all this noise, I think of Sartre's play, *Men Without Shadows*. In it the character Lucie asks the same question three times and it seems the only way to articulate the pain I feel myself: What is this unbearable silence? What is this unbearable silence? What is this unbearable silence?

Notes & sources

JVP – Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna – People's Liberation Front

JHU – Jathika Hela Urumaya – National Heritage Party

LTTE – The Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam

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