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# The Politics of Memorialising Violent Memories

RUDOLF C HEREDIA

BOOK REVIEWS

**Violence and the Burden of Memory: Remembrance and Erasure in Sinhala Consciousness** by Sasanka Perera, *New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2016; pp xvii +322, ₹745.*

A society that has been traumatised by collective violence over decades will be haunted by painful memories which cannot be easily erased. Negation only represses memories into our subconscious with unintended consequences later. To cope with such remembrances, we must find conscious ways of expression that help healing wounded memories and recalling affirmative ones. Mourning loss and grief, and celebrating victory and deliverance are part of this commemorative process.

All societies must remember their history to learn not to repeat it, either as tragedy or as farce. Personal and collective memories are tied in with personal and collective identities. Memories shared connect and enrich, whereas memory loss impoverishes and distances. Personal memories are treasured in family narratives and albums, while collective memories are embedded in a people's past through their traditions and legends, literature and art. However, memory is always selective. What we remember and how we do so defines the process of remembering and forgetting and dictates the memorialisation, such as to remake the past so a projected future can be premised on it.

## Sinhala Exclusivism

In Sri Lanka, a protracted period of brutalising violence was precipitated by the politics of Sinhala exclusivism. State terror against the violence of the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurrection (1967–89) peaked in the 1980s. Rather than finding a political solution and accommodating the legitimate demands of this movement, the government resorted to brutal extra-judicial violence to suppress it, upping the ante with counter-violence and then dealing with the JVP as a terrorist movement. This further internalised the violence in a society increasingly familiar with growing levels of violence, leaving this to fester alongside already traumatised memories of loss and grief. The Tamil grievances were treated similarly.

The roots of the Sinhala–Tamil civil war go back to the 1950s when Sinhala chauvinism with its linguistic exclusivism began marginalising Tamil sections. Inevitably, such aggressive majoritarianism precipitated a militant minoritism, which then spiralled into a secessionist civil war with neither side willing to concede any compromise: a federal state with Tamil autonomy was too much for the government and too little for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Of the many Tamil groups that fought for the rights of the Tamils, the LTTE, founded in 1976, was the most violent. After eliminating rival groups in the Tamil movement, the violence of the Tigers intensified in the 1980s and climaxed in the 1990s. It was only in 2009 that the Sri Lankan army, disregarding the collateral damage to non-combatants and the environment, ended the war and eradicated the Tamil Tigers. Even the cemeteries of the LTTE (p 191), which celebrated their war heroes, (*mahaveer*) were eradicated.

This violence against the Tamil minorities inevitably brutalised mainstream Sri Lankan society as well. In the aftermath of the violence, the physical ruins could be restored but the brutality of the devastation still lingers in the memories of people, especially the Tamils who were its worst victims. For as the United Nations (UN) Commissioner for Human Rights said in Colombo in 2013, "although the fighting is over, the suffering is not" (p 260). Sasanka Perera enters this narrative of terror trying to reach the other side:

> Metaphorically, I have waded through the blood, with numerous visions of unpleasant things I have seen and narratives of cruelties I have heard very clearly etched in my mind ... Those stories will continue in different registers and with different degrees of intensity. (p 262)

Perera's book focuses on the Sinhala experience and their remembrances in the aftermath of the war. Obviously, this is but half the story. Until the Tamil side is told and both narratives shared together, there is little hope for true justice to the victims and lasting reconciliation between the protagonists. Denial and unwillingness to come to terms with such serious human rights abuses, let alone address the legitimate demands and genuine hopes of the affected populations, does not bode well for the future. The refusal of an authoritarian majority government to countenance an independent UN inquiry into human rights abuses is tantamount to sowing the seeds of future troubles and violent disturbances, inviting a repeat of the past from which little has seemingly been learnt.

## Monuments and Memorialisation

Perera describes, separately, official monuments celebrating state victory and glorifying heroism as well as personal remembrances recalling grief and loss. The connection with the larger society gives life to these structures, both personal installations in the private domain of family and friends, and official ones in the public domain. Thus, the monuments of the army and the police will have ceremonies and rituals enacted on national occasions to recall historic moments, including the Elephant Pass War Memorial (p 271), or the Victory Monument in Pudupattinam, Puthukkudiyiruppu (p 268) to celebrate the end of the civil war; while personal sculptures connect with those who share the

same personal experience, as with the Monument for the "Disappeared" at Seeduwa (p 129), or the Shrine of the Innocents at Sri Jayawardenapura to commemorate the youth killed in the JVP insurrection (p 110).

The monuments are described in great detail in three chapters (Chapter 2: "Celebrating Heroism and Glorifying Death," Chapter 3: "Remembering Death and Mourning the Loss of Innocence," and Chapter 4: "Domains of Private Memory"); while the visual arts and poetry are taken up in Chapter 5. These will be of great interest to historians and perhaps, tourist guides manning these sites. However, the introductory chapter "The Burden of Memory," and the concluding one "Erasure, Lingering Memory and Moving Beyond," would be of significance to a wider readership. We learn how nonverbal memorialisation deals better with the resistance of language in communicating powerful emotions and/or intense pain (p 22). Monuments are remembrances that allow for multiple levels of meaning-making and so can address those who connect more meaningfully. But this also means it can be contested by the different constituencies that interact with and interpret it differently, even from adversarial perspectives.

However, in general, the purpose of a monument is twofold: (i) didactic or pedagogic, teaching/learning from the past for healing and closure from painful memories, and (ii) affirmative or celebratory, to open hope in the wake of traumatic events (p 23). Thus, the attack against Dalits on 1 January 2018 at their celebration of the British victory over the Maratha forces at Bhima–Koregaon 200 years ago in January 1818 is a stark illustration of this. For the Dalits, the victory pillar at the battle site celebrated the event that ended the Brahmin(ical) rule of the Peshwas. Their rallies at the war memorial in Pune were to affirm their own history and their membership in the victorious East India Company's forces. For the upper castes, the battle marked the loss of their rule and subjugation by the colonial power. Their attack on the Dalits, therefore, was a reaffirmation of their dominance and a denial of the Dalits' right to interpret their own history.

Sometimes symbols meant to represent national solidarity, like the national flag, get appropriated by chauvinist nationalists (such as the Hindu right wing in India). The assault on Muslims at the flag-hoisting ceremony at Kasganj, Uttar Pradesh, on the occasion of Republic Day 2018 exposed the exclusivist Hindu *rashtravadis* (nationalists). The Muslims were expressing solidarity with the nation on a day of national importance, however the Hindutvawadis were acting in furtherance of Muslim alienation and imposition of Hindu dominance on them.

## Communalisation of Memory

There are similarities across these violent communal divides, whether of ethnicity, or race, or religion or caste in the rest of South Asia and beyond. The savage civil war between the Unionists and the Confederates in the United States (1860–65) ended with the abolition of slavery, but left behind a subterranean racism. The civil rights movement almost a century later, beginning in 1962, was led by Martin Luther King Jr, who became a martyr to its cause in 1968 and a national hero. Yet in spite of all this, racism persists among the "white supremacists" there, for whom Black lives do not seem to matter.

The communal violence between Hindus and Muslims that led up to and peaked with the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 was paused by the murder of Mahatma Gandhi; but the communal divide was not resolved. It is once again being deliberately revived by a jingoistic politics of hate. This is re-enacted with every communal riot in India, which has become a cruel instrument of regressive identity politics. This re-enacts collective violence, of the sort seen before and after the partition of 1947, and deepens the communal divide even further. "Pakistan ya kabristan" (Pakistan or the graveyard) is the battle cry of deeply resentful militant Hindus who, in denial of their own role in the horrendous imbroglio, still continue to blame Muslims for the partition and use religious nationalism to fuel a politics of polarisation for electoral gain. This is a dangerous game for the future of all Indians.

In the original Pakistani state, religious nationalism was soon superseded by ethnolinguistic politics which spilt over into a genocidal military attempt to subjugate East Pakistan's Bengali province to the Urdu-speaking ones of West Pakistan. With the intervention of India in 1971, this stand-off ended with the cessation of East Bengal from Pakistan and its transformation into an independent nation called Bangladesh, only 24 years after the Indo–Pak partition. Such a process of fission may not end here. In Nepal, a violent Maoist insurrection launched by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), on 13 February 1996, ended with a compromise but after abolishing the monarchy in 2007. However, the young democracy is still struggling with its new constitution and the final outcome is yet to be stabilised.

Civil wars and collective violence leave a long trail in their aftermath. Unless the underlying issues are addressed and resolved, they will sooner or later resurface. The residue of resentment these leave behind are easily politicised and the violence revived in periodic eruptions. These become a continuing attrition of the very soul of a society. They sharpen and deepen communal divisions and may sooner or later precipitate another civil war and another regional cession. This cannot be resolved if the underlying jingoist violent ideology is not neutralised and defanged, whether this ethnocentricity be based on race or caste or religious nationalism of whatever hue: Islamism or Hindutva, chauvinist Buddhism or Zionism. Or else history will repeat itself, and it will be all the more tragic for it could have been anticipated and avoided.

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