

THREE QUESTIONS IN SEARCH OF ANSWERS

-Remarks by Jayantha Dhanapala at the launch of the book "Jaffna and Colombo A century of relationships in three plays" E.F.C.Ludowyk's 'He Comes From Jaffna'; Ernest Macintyre's 'Rasanayagam's Last Riot' and 'He Still Comes From Jaffna' (Vijitha Yapa Publications)

I have - at various times in my professional career - had to introduce myself as an 'extinguished Ambassador' and still later as a 'defunct UN Under-Secretary-General'. Today I guess I should introduce myself as 'an also-ran in the UNSG stakes of 2006'! Despite that record of being a 'has-been', Ernest Macintyre - a friend from the halcyon days of Peradeniya in the late 1950s - has deemed it fit to invite me to make some remarks on the occasion of this book launch. It is both an honour and a pleasure for me to do so. I begin by congratulating Mac on the launch of the book. It brings into print the famous play of Professor Lyn Ludowyk (serendipitously in the centenary year of his birth with an interesting note on the play's origins and some editing by Macintyre) and two of Mac's own plays from amongst an oeuvre that has delighted audiences in Sri Lanka and Australia. I recall reading a well-know Shakespearean producer and critic saying that a Shakespeare play was like a musical score awaiting performance. The point is that plays are meant to be performed live on stage and not read in the quiet of a library. Notwithstanding this caveat, it is good to have the plays within bound covers to be savoured from time to time.

As a prelude however, I would like to draw attention to what is perhaps a new phenomenon in the social calendar of Colombo today and that is - the Book Launch. Sociologists may see this as analogous to the horse races of the 1940s and '50s conducted by the Ceylon Turf Club or the rucker matches of the '60s and the '70s - although we have still to have the fashion columnists record who wore what at these events! Seriously however, the frequency of Book Launches is a tribute to the recent efflorescence of creative and other writing in the English language - thanks largely to Michael Ondaatje (who is present with us today) and his generous donation of the Gratiaen Prize which has stimulated that creativity. But we must also thank publishers like Vijitha Yapa who have combined entrepreneurial skills with a genuine concern for the literary milieu and reading public of our country. I would like to see the day when book launches of English, Sinhala and Tamil writers are held regularly and with the same audiences being introduced to new volumes of literary and other writing by Sri Lankan authors.

My remarks this evening are not going to be in the form of a conventional review of the plays as theatre or as a contribution to Sri Lankan creative writing in English. The little 'Practical Criticism' in the I.A.Richards-F.R.Leavis tradition that I learned in the Dept. of English in Peradeniya has long been forgotten. Besides, the excellent introduction to the plays written by Shelagh Goonewardena in the book is both insightful and comprehensive enough. My approach, rather, is to view the plays in the context of the title of the book - "Jaffna and Colombo - A century of relationships in three plays". In the period of transition between the building of the railroad connecting Jaffna and Colombo at the beginning of the 20th century and the events of today we have had a tragic transformation

which, while being the stuff of drama, is more a sad indictment of the governance of our country and the conduct of our inter-personal and inter-ethnic relations.

Four decades of experience as a diplomatic practitioner has taught me - if nothing else - that the best approach, especially to delicate and controversial issues, is to pose questions and then to search for answers collectively rather than to present the answers dogmatically and unilaterally. No one, after all, has a monopoly over wisdom. Consequently I have three questions to pose based on my reactions to Macintyre's book. They are -

- ❖ When do 'ethnic jokes' become unfunny and politically incorrect?
- ❖ Why are we still looking for a road connecting Jaffna and Colombo?
- ❖ And finally, did the Peradeniya generation fail the country by not helping to bridge the ethnic divide?

Let me take each of these questions one by one. The first "When do ethnic jokes become unfunny and politically incorrect?" All countries have ethnic and other jokes targeting particular groups who become the butt of good-natured banter and fun. In Sri Lanka we have for years had the stereotype of the frugal man from Jaffna - portrayed in Ludowyk's play as Duraiswamypillai frowning on his son's acquisition of a watch when there are so many clock towers in Colombo! Likewise we have stereotypes of the Sinhalese, the Muslim and the Burgher as we do of the country bumpkin Banda who comes to town. Some of the jokes dwelt on the mispronunciation of the majority language but two distinguished citizens of Kandy spawned a legion of jokes about their malapropisms and other mutilations of the English language. These were jokes made in a time of innocence by and large with no malice intended and none taken. We are not alone in having had ethnic and other jokes aimed at groups of our people. In India we have jokes about the Sikhs and others; in Europe and elsewhere there are jokes about the Jews. There are Polish jokes, Scottish jokes, Irish jokes and many others. In every case there are identifiable foibles that are lampooned. What we may not have realized is that while we all laughed at these jokes in more relaxed times they did conceal some prejudice, some snobbery and certainly some insensitivity albeit carefully disguised. They also became a vehicle to perpetuate the stereotypes from generation to generation accentuating what divides us rather than what unites us.

Today we have a new phenomenon on the Western comedy scene - a British Cambridge-educated Jew, Sacha Baron Cohen, who has invented the character of Borat as a Kazakhstan journalist touring the USA making the most outrageous and sexually explicit jokes about Jews, gays and other groups that would normally be regarded as politically incorrect. And yet his astonishingly popular film, "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan", is seen as the spoof that it is with Kazakhstan officials themselves cleverly using it to portray the tourist and investment possibilities in that Central Asian country. I have no doubt that there are many who take

offence at Borat and that many instances of anti-Semitism continue in the West. But the fact that, as a Jew, Cohen can make jokes about his people denotes a certain self-confidence and security about his identity. It is this personal security - or human security if you like - that finally matters. The human rights of the groups that are the butt of jokes must be well entrenched and protected. Ethnic jokes can be the subject of good humour and even mutual enjoyment when social relationships are ordered and stable in countries. They are not funny where ethnic and other diversities are not well managed and where being different endangers your physical existence or the respect paid to you as a human being with equal rights.

Where then does one draw the line between innocent ethnic jokes and cruel and hurtful racist insults? In Macintyre's strongest and best play "Rasanayagam's Last Riot", that line is drawn when the minority Sri Lankan Tamil man's pronunciation of the Sinhala word "Baaldiya" is the test that a racist mob subjects him to. His failure to pass the test ends in his murder.

Let me move on to my second question - " Why are we still looking for a road connecting Jaffna and Colombo?". Perhaps we should be talking of a road connecting Valvettithurai with Hambantota from where Prabakaran and President Rajapakse come. My question is prompted by the graphic cover of Macintyre's book which has the drawing of a ruptured railroad. The railroad built in British colonial times linked the North with the capital city and the night mail to Jaffna, and later the Yaldevi, allowed for a rich human interaction among all ethnic groups travelling in it. The Yaldevi was as integral a part of the railway communication system just as the Udarata Menike and the Ruhunu Kumari was. The LTTE blew up the railroad as part of their terrorist campaign and it has not been repaired since. The A9 road, closed for years, was re-opened with the cease-fire agreement and, for security reason, is again impassable beyond Muhamalai. I do not wish to examine here the political and security reasons for this state of affairs and its sad consequences for the civilian population. We have of course sea routes and air routes available but fraught with danger and of course very expensive for the average citizen. But the point at issue is - do we really want to commute and communicate between Jaffna and Colombo? And is the absence of a physical road between us not a result of mental attitudes?

The preamble of UNESCO's Constitution has the well-known words. "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." Less well known is the continuation of the preamble which says " That a peace based exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace which could secure the unanimous, lasting and sincere support of the peoples of the world, and that the peace must therefore be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind". It is that intellectual and moral solidarity of humankind that we must set as our goal within our own country and in the world as the politicians squabble about forms of devolution. The culture of violence created over two decades of conflict must be replaced with a new culture of peace. We have first to build roads among the different ethnic and religious groups of our country in our minds. The physical roads will then be opened for the free flow of people and goods.

My final question - "Did the Peradeniya generation fail the country by not helping to bridge the ethnic divide?" Again drawing on Macintyre's play, "Rasanayagam's Last Riot". the two characters Philip and Rasanayagam - buddies from the same hall of residence in the Peradeniya campus - meet everytime there is a racial riot. They wallow in nostalgic memories of their undergraduate days, get drunk and sing their bailas. But they do not discuss the fundamental majority-minority relationship in their country which have led to the riots that bring them together until they are forced to by Sita at the very end - and then it is too late. Shelagh Goonewardena notes perceptively that Macintyre uses the inter-ethnic Sinhala-Tamil marriage between Philip and Sita as a metaphor. Equally important is to see the relationship between the two undergraduate friends as a failure of the Peradeniya-educated elite to confront and solve the problems that lead to the racial riots. Amidst the sloganising and emotive outpourings in the country the intelligentsia failed to conduct a rational dialogue.

Benjamin Disraeli in another country and another time found two nations in 18th century England - the rich and the poor. We are also two nations in more ways than one. First we are the English speaking and non-English speaking with the English language 'kaduwa' cleaving us apart. That gulf was to a large extent bridged by the bilingualism of the Peradeniya generation. As Macintyre's character Rasanayagam puts it "What happened inevitably was that Sarachchandra's people merged easily with you people to run the country". And so the 'Kultur' and the 'Ofac' merged pressured by the wave of political and social changes after 1956 and, more recently, by the renewed demand for English caused by the Information Technology revolution. But we are also two nations in another sense - the majority Sinhala and the minority Tamil. That gulf was not bridged by the Peradeniya- educated elite. It was avoided as an uncomfortable subject just as Philip and Rasanayagam avoid discussing it in their meetings during the riots. Perhaps it was because at the professional middle class level that the competition for jobs exposed the racial rivalries which were absent at the village level and the working class level. Whatever the reason the ethnic divide remained and grew wider as the years rolled by. Could the Peradeniya educated elite have done more?

Let me conclude. Both plays of Macintyre have tragic endings. That is the playwright's prerogative and his artistic license. In "Rasanayagam's Last Riot" Rasanayagam, in a poignant final scene faced by a murderous mob, refuses to say the Sinhala word that he knew so well and that will save him, and is brutally killed. In "He Still Comes from Jaffna" Paths the terrorist lies dead on stage. There is a sombre and almost fatalistic message in this. I cannot accept this as the reality of the Sri Lankan situation. I am confident of a happier denouement of our real life drama and as an antidote to Macintyre's pessimism I would like to cite from two sources.

The first is from the famous pastoral letter of the late Bishop Lakshman Wickremesinghe - a great and good man whom both Macintyre and I knew in Peradeniya. Bishop Lak, in apologizing to the Tamil people on behalf of the Sinhalese for the terrible atrocities in the riots of July 1983, wrote "The main point however is that the true basis of reconciliation is admission of wrong done and appeal for forgiveness. When forgiveness is given or a mutual apology is evoked, reconciliation begins to take effect, slowly but surely.

Hardened attitudes begin to change." We should, then, begin by apologizing to each other for the wrongs we have done to each other. This must be followed by forgiveness since "Forgiveness is the well from which we draw water to wash other's feet".

My second source is the United Nations High Level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations, which issued a report in November this year. Headed by the Prime Ministers of Spain and Turkey it essentially debunks the Samuel Huntington thesis on the inevitability of the 'clash of civilizations' and the hardening of fault lines between civilizations separating different groups in an apartheid-like existence. That wrong-headed thesis has been seized upon after 9/11 to launch a wave of Islamophobia provoking a virtual re-enactment of the medieval crusades between the Islamic world and Western Christendom. Thus Danish cartoons can ignite a series of violent demonstrations in the Islamic world and the veil is mindlessly banned in the West. As a counter to this the UN group found diversity to be a driving force of human progress. The apparent intolerance in the world is in fact being reversed through migration, integration and technology. Indeed that is the future for Sri Lanka where our rich diversity of ethnic and religious groups in our pluralist democracy must be made both a cultural and political strength. We cannot continue to live in an age where, in the words of W.B. Yeats,

"The best lack all conviction

While the worst are full of passionate intensity".

We must all be full of 'passionate intensity' to achieve a united Sri Lanka where all ethnic and religious groups can live in freedom, equality and dignity.

Jayantha Dhanapala

(Jayantha Dhanapala is a former UN Under-Secretary-General and a former Ambassador of Sri Lanka. This piece is based on informal and unscripted remarks made by him on December 2, 2006 at the Book Launch)