

Some decades ago I quoted Santayana's dictum that a people who cannot remember its past is doomed to repeat it. I cannot remember the exact words. Shortly thereafter President Jayewardene repeated the quotation, and it was much in vogue for some years. Now, in writings on July '83, the idea that a people who cannot remember its past is doomed to repeat it has been powerfully revived, though the quotation has been forgotten. A convenient and convincing illustration for that idea has been found in the ongoing racist anti-Muslim hate campaign and anti-Muslim action, which some weeks ago led to widespread fears of a repetition of the July '83 pogrom, this time against the Muslims. All that can be seen as the consequence of a failure to remember the past, specifically the horrors brought to us by racist anti-Tamil action, particularly in July '83.

I now want to make what seems to me a crucially important clarification of what Santayana probably, or almost certainly, had in mind in making his dictum. An erudite philosopher, Santayana could hardly have been unaware of the fact that a people often remembers its past selectively and with distortions to suit its present and future interests. I suppose that is what Henry Ford had in mind in declaring, "History is bunk". Some would argue that all history is purposive, not an unbiased record of what really happened but future-oriented interpretations meant to serve the interests of a people. However, it is incontrovertible that some things did actually happen in the past, and commonsense tells us that our interpretations can be right or wrong to varying degrees. So, what is important is not just to remember the past, but to try to remember it as it actually was, not as we would like it to have been.

What I have stated above is certainly of cardinal importance for the major problem confronting Sri Lanka today: national reconciliation. In South Africa truth and reconciliation were seen as going together integrally. Both sides had to engage in a reckoning over what happened in the past, both sides had to acknowledge their wrong-doing, and both sides had to express repentance as the necessary basis on which to build the mutual trust without which there can be no lasting reconciliation. That approach led to a glorious success in South Africa. In Sri Lanka the process of reconciliation has so far proved to be an inglorious failure. I believe that one of the reasons, perhaps the most important one, for the failure is that we have not given sufficient importance to establishing the truth about what happened in the past. We certainly remember the past – indeed we tend to be obsessed by the past – but too often we remember the past not as it actually was, but as we would like it to have been. This applies particularly to the horrors of July '83.

In this article, I propose two things: firstly, that we undertake a proper in-depth investigation into the holocaust of July '83, and secondly that we acknowledge the shocking failure of the Sinhalese civil society to respond appropriately to that holocaust. The Sharvananda Commission was appointed by President Kumaratunga to investigate the holocaust, but most unfortunately it was rendered farcical by not being provided enough personnel, resources, or time to do a credible job, and after the Commission gave its Report President Kumaratunga made a perfunctory collective apology on behalf of the Sinhalese people to the Tamils. All that

amounted to a useless exercise. The reason why it is now imperative to hold a proper in-depth inquiry into the holocaust was suggested by the rationale set out for the Nuremberg Trials by the Chief British Prosecutor, Sir Hartley Shawcross. His main point was that the alternative to establishing the guilt of the Nazi leaders would be to leave room for the notion of the collective guilt of the German people for the Second World War and all its horrors, and that would make the task of constructing a lasting peace much more difficult. Indeed, it was the notion of the collective guilt of the German people that led to the vindictive Peace Settlement after the First World War, which set the stage for the Second. In Sri Lanka, the process of reconciliation will be much more difficult if the Tamil people are stuck with the notion that the Sinhalese people are collectively guilty for the horrors of July '83.

I am sure that an impartial investigation will reveal that what occurred on the ethnic front from 1977 to 1983 was State terrorism against the Tamils, and not the collective racist outbursts of the Sinhalese people against the Tamils. It is a revealing fact that from 1958 to 1977 there were no anti-Tamil riots at all. It was widely expected when J. R. Jayewardene assumed power in 1977 that he would expeditiously proceed to hold the All-Party Conference, from which would follow a political solution for the Tamils. Instead, just three weeks after he came to power the first anti-Tamil pogrom occurred, resulting in the deaths of around 100 to 300 Tamils. There were no signs, none whatever, of Sinhalese mass participation in those riots. They were the opening salvo of the State terrorism that raged until 1983. Many believe that the 1977 riots constituted the great divide, after which the Tamils came to be inexorably driven to violent rebellion.

The next stage was reached in 1979 when JRJ sent his nephew Bull Weeratunga to Jaffna to clear up the nonsense of rebellion within six months. The operations began reportedly with the police killing some Tamils whose eviscerated and mutilated bodies were put on public display, obviously as a warning to other Tamils that they would suffer terrible fates if they didn't stop their nonsense forthwith. JRJ promised Amirthalingam an inquiry, which I am told on excellent authority led to the then IGP proceeding to the President's office with his resignation in his pocket. He was persuaded by G. V. P. Samarasinghe and others to continue in office. An honorable man, the IGP in his political innocence had not understood that there would be no serious inquiry incriminating the police. What happened in Jaffna in the next six months badly needs impartial investigations.

The next important development in the progression of State terrorism was the abortion of the DC elections and the burning of the Jaffna Library in 1981. The latter outrage was committed under the aegis of police officers who we are told were given immediate promotions by JRJ. Some time ago a retired DIG gave an alternative version of what had happened, but that version was challenged by others. There is all the more reason therefore for an impartial inquiry. There were no killings during the perpetration of that outrage, but it is important for establishing the charge of State terrorism. My point is that JRJ was demonstrating that he and his gang would use the resources of the State to whack the Tamils just as he pleased with total impunity.

And that is what we saw happening in July '83, about which I will not go into many details as they are well-known. 13 soldiers were killed in ambush by the LTTE, in retaliation for which soldiers went into a village and killed 51 Tamils, but evidently powerful personages did not think

that that was sufficient by way of retaliation. The practice of burying soldiers in their villages was abandoned and arrangements were made for their funerals in Colombo, accompanied by political fanfare that was obviously meant to rouse the Sinhalese masses into anti-Tamil fury. The Welikada jail massacre, if nothing else, showed very clearly the hand of the terrorist State in what was going on. It was only on Black Friday that the Sinhalese masses were roused into mass rioting against the Tamils, the consequence of a fear psychosis induced by the story that the Tigers had come into Colombo. What I and others like me have been saying may be controversial, but that's all the more reason for an impartial inquiry.

One point has to be clarified. There was no Cabinet decision, no decision by the Government as a whole, for the State to engage in terrorist action against the Tamils, and it could be argued therefore that there was no State terrorism as such. In refutation of that argument I will take the analogy provided by the Nazi holocaust against the Jews. There was no decision by the Nazi Government approving a genocide program against the Jews, nor were there public statements by Hitler or any of the other Nazi leaders approving it. Many of them pretended that they were not even aware of the genocidal killings that were going on, notably Albert Speer – a Hitler favorite – who fooled Westerners on that point for many decades. Certainly the German people as a whole were not aware of the genocide that was going on. It remains that Hitler and his associates, notably Himmler, who was in charge of the genocide program, did subject the Jews to genocide using the resources of the State. In Sri Lanka JRJ and his associates, backed by extremist Sinhalese racists, subjected the Tamils to terrorism – by which I mean essentially the killing of innocent non-combatant civilians – using the resources of the State between 1977 and 1983. It makes sense therefore to say that they engaged in State terrorism.

My second purpose in this article, as I stated earlier, is to propose that we acknowledge the shocking failure of the Sinhalese civil society to respond appropriately to July '83. The subject of the inadequacies of our civil society as a whole requires in-depth treatment, which I cannot undertake here. I will limit myself to just a very few observations on the subject. First of all, I have in mind the shocking failure of the SLFP to respond at all to what was being done to the Tamils. That was in striking and horrible contrast to the Opposition's splendid performance over the 1958 riots.

Secondly, I have in mind specifically the failure to recognise and acknowledge the State terroristic aspect of what was being done to the Tamils from 1977 to 1983. I may have been the first to do so – there could have been a few, very few others – in an address I made to the YMCA Forum sometime in 1992 or 1993, which I followed up with a two-part article in the Lanka Guardian. Chandrika Kumaratunga could have been among the very few to recognise that State terroristic aspect, but she failed to make a success of the Sharvananda Commission. There seems to be a reluctance in the Sinhalese civil society to face up to July '83 in all its horror. I say this because of a surprising experience I had around 2002 when I attended a meeting organised by the Liberal Party with Rajiva Wijesinha in the Chair. The discussion veered round to the question of holding inquiries on what really happened in July'83. All the minority members present, plus Rajiva W, were in favour of it, while all the other Sinhalese were vehemently against it. The latter included some very prominent Marxist and left-wing intellectuals. I

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