

The apparent public outcry and protest about the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with India has acted like a trigger to impel a searching inquiry and analysis of why there is such brouhaha. The outcome is quite enlightening.

The 443-year Colonial period introduced European forms of governance to this country. First, the Portuguese and their military rule, then the Dutch and their corporate form of administration and finally the British imperial civil administration. What we have inherited today is the legacy left behind by the British when they departed in 1948. That structure of command and control is with us with minor modifications. Those 'modifications' haven't improved the system, only made it even more arbitrary by vesting almost unbridled power in the hands of governing party politicians and their toadies and lick-spittles.

When the British took over from the Dutch in 1796 and in 1803 converted the Island into a Crown Colony they gradually introduced a colonial administration under a governor appointed in Whitehall. The basic purpose of this rule was to exploit the natural resources of the Island and extract as much revenue as possible by way of taxes, levies, licences, permits, duties and other forms of garnering money from the population. For ease of governance the country was divided into provinces under a 'government agent.' Under him there functioned several 'district revenue officers.' Their main function was to keep the money flowing into the Treasury. The country was supposed to pay its own way without being a burden on the British Exchequer. This didn't always happen and the Island's expenditure had to be subsidised on several occasions in the early years. However, in pursuance of the main goal of exploiting the country to the fullest, land was expropriated and vested in the Crown and became 'Crown Lands' to be disposed of according to the wishes of the Government in London.

In the empire-building period that began in the 1700s and continued into the 1900s the colonies had to produce cash crops: Cinchona, tea, coffee, sugar, rubber, tobacco, cocoa, oil palm, coconut, cotton and so on. If the resident population was averse to working on these plantations, labour was transported across the seas and transplanted in alien surroundings, much like the pieces on a chess board. For the better part of the first half-century much of this was slave or indentured labour kept in appalling conditions.

The structures and systems developed during this era were designed to suit the rulers and their convenience regardless of any and all other considerations. It was, perforce, utterly authoritarian and arbitrary and acted on with impunity. The colonial masters were immune to any sort of protest or challenge and brooked no opposition whatsoever. If there was any criticism of the exploitation going on or the inhumanity of the system by their own, that individual

was sent back home to nurse his ideals. If it was from the missionary clergy, the Bishop was prevailed upon to transfer the inconvenient cleric out of the country as soon as possible.

When the Police Force was set-up, it replaced the volunteer town guards made-up of citizens. The Force was, from the outset, to maintain British 'Law & Order' regardless of such concepts as those of justice or equity. It, like its name, was a 'Force' mandated to use force, coercion, and compulsion with impunity. Ordinary people, as distinct from the White Masters, were to be treated with contempt, utter contempt. They had to know their 'place' in the order of things under the then prevailing universal Pax Britannica.

The social order was from time immemorial based on caste. The new element that was now introduced was the British class system that was superimposed on caste and both conspired to reduce the average person to a servile dog. People were treated as utter nonentities or nobodies by all public servants. Those employed by government assumed airs and graces and lorded it over the ordinary public. They were kept waiting in queues, kept standing, sent from pillar to post, shouted at, abused, humiliated, and even chased out by irate public servants who had been annoyed or irritated. At the hands of the Police it was even worse! Complainants or accused were assaulted with hands, batons, and even rifle-butts, and roundly abused in the most obscene language. These were commonplace occurrences and so much so that ordinary people fear the Police to this day. No one wants to walk into a Police Station unless it was a dire emergency!

All decisions were taken by the 'authorities' and you complied, (and dared not complain lest worse befall you). The 'authorities' of course, was the Government, that almighty power over and above us, generally perceived as both omnipresent and omnipotent. This was driven home to the extent that it killed whatever initiative the people had to do anything. Roads were not repaired; irrigation channels not cleaned; breached bunds not filled, or anything else done. All was left to the almighty Government, the 'aanduva' to do at its will and pleasure and in its own good time.

When internal self-government became a reality after universal franchise was granted in 1931, people looked forward to a sea-change. However, nothing happened. Many 'nobodies' became 'somebodies' and stepped into the White Man's shoes and continued as before. Not exactly, because, corruption and malpractice began to raise its ugly head and the bad example began at the top with these new men at the helm. Hope, of course, is ever present and the people, now enthused at the prospect of 'independence' expected a change from what were a basically oppressive structure and its systems in force. Well, 1948 came, and nothing really happened. Then, 1956 came and the only apparent change was that Western attire was

exchanged for National dress!

Politicians are an insecure breed because they exist by lying on one hand and sycophancy on the other. And their insecurity breeds more and more arbitrariness, more and more authoritarianism and they become pocket-despots. This is demonstrated in talking with a humble villager who said, wistfully, that the governance of the British was far superior to what now obtained. He went on to say that the British were fair-minded and not vindictive. They did not take revenge because one had voted for the party that lost the election! But, of course, there were no elections when the British Raj prevailed and the villager's point was that they were better off under the alien yoke!

Now, we come to the raucous and discordant protests mounted by the Opposition, one coalition partner and a host of private sector representatives about CEPA. This has happened simply because governments (this and the previous ones) have no political culture whatsoever about democratic consultation and consensus. They have inherited a legacy of arbitrary rule and that pernicious attitude permeates the entire bureaucracy—passed on from generation to generation of public service officials. Government decides, period. Public servants carry out, period. Others aren't to be consulted. Stakeholders? What stakeholders? The People? The Private Sector? Rubbish! They're there to vote when elections are called. The Private Sector is there to bankroll political parties when called upon to do so. They import, they export, they distribute, and they pay taxes, period. Isn't this the actual scenario? Isn't this why we have such controversies raging over our heads with various groups and individuals trying to get some mileage out of it?

The Government should learn telling lessons from all this. It is NOT a power unto itself because it derives its power from the Sovereign People, you and me! Therefore, it should consult the People through concerned Civil Society bodies, Chambers of Commerce and Industry, importers & exporters associations, and Opposition political parties. The proposed agreement should be scrutinised by all these representatives of the People. They should discuss and debate the objections raised. All that is the duty of government working in a transparent manner. Every agreement with any foreign government should go through this same process and be adopted (or rejected) consensually. That would be the democratic way. Why do we have to handcuff ourselves to an arbitrary colonial frame? We should now dismantle colonial ways of thinking, colonial structures, and colonial systems and adopt what is best for us. We must think in terms of ONE Nation if we want to survive as a viable political entity.

~ www.island.lk ~ By J.B. Müller