A FIRST CLASS GOVIGAMA

Michael Roberts

***The Expedient Utopian: Bandaranaike and Ceylon*, By James Manor, Cambridge University Press, 1989, 338 pp.**

James Manor has produced a solid political biography of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, whose coalition of parties (known as the MEP) effected a striking electoral victory in 1956 and inaugurated momentous changes in Sri Lanka's political order. These changes are still being worked through, for the ethnic competition between Tamils and Sinhalese was aggravated by the forces of 1956. Bandaranaike did not live to influence these developing effects because he was assassinated by a disaffected clique led by a Buddhist monk.

Manor's approach is a combination of the transactionalist, the intellectual historian and the organisation theorist. His narrative follows the chronological sequence in great detail, the detail reflecting the breadth of his sources and being enriched by oral communications from many individuals. The book's rich minutiae may alienate non-specialists. Inevitably, too, such detail takes Manor into a few areas in which his expertise is limited: so that, for instance, the interpretive errors in his description of land policy in the twentieth century are quite striking.

An important thread in *The Expedient Utopian* is provided by Manor's dissection of Bandaranaike's political thought and the identification of the influences, intellectual and otherwise, which shaped his thinking. Manor argues that Bandaranaike has no systematic body of ideas and that his moralising was lyrical. These utopian fancies, his "monumental conceit," his opportunism and his preoccupation with power enabled Bandaranaike to both adopt and accept egalitarian and reformist ideas. The very isolation of his early aristocratic upbringing enabled him to transcend class prejudices and his class-cum-caste fraction (the first class Goyigama) and to harness the grievances of disaffected caste fractions to his drive for power through the ballot.

Manor's decoding of Bandaranaike's intellectual interventions is contextualised through the detailing of events and an unveiling of his personal foibles. The presentation is both deft and balanced, cleaving a middle path between cavil and eulogy. Manor's narrative strategy is to place Bandaranaike "at the centre" and to move out "from the centre in ever-widening circles." In this fashion "each new arena that [Bandaranaike] enters, each new group and social stratum that he meets, [is] dealt with as and when he encounters them" (p. 1). This strategy is explicitly intended to guard against the great man theory of history.

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It works up to a point. The questions remain: what about Bandaranaike's silences? What major stands, what processes, in the history of the island did he not engage? And doesn't the great man theory slip in when it is claimed that "Bandaranaike was the central, pivotal figure in Ceylon's modern political transformation" (p.1)?

By pursuing this strategy, Manor's significant contribution is to reveal two overlapping threads in the story of Bandaranaike and Sri Lanka's twentieth century politics. One is the interplay between social reform and populist nationalism with a chauvinist hue, two political strands which were often in contradiction to each other (pp. 9, 127, 135-37, 169, 202, 253 and 254-318). The second theme is the resulting picture of ambiguity. Indeed, ambiguity and incongruity emerge as one of the book's major findings, ambiguity within Bandaranaike, inconsistency in his rhetoric and his programmes, and ambiguity in the developing political order.

In presenting these motifs, Manor reiterates one of his favourite criticisms of the political system established in 1948-and-thereafter: it is fatally overcentralised and there are few institutional links between the grassroots level and the centres of decision-making. Thus, Manor takes every opportunity to illustrate his contention that all the major political associations in Ceylon have "suffered from an excessive concentration of power in the hands of its leader" (p.140; also pp. 145-46, 147, 202, 208, 264).

This is a cogent finding which bears repetition, because the new constitutions of 1972 and 1978 did not modify this weakness. I would, however, have liked to see this argument related to the suggestion, made in different ways by Calvin Woodward and this reviewer, that democratic traditions have been weak in Sri Lanka - even among the much vaunted middle class generations of the 1930s -1960s. It would also have been useful to have Manor's reflections on another argument which I have presented, *viz.* to the effect that a cultural model of authoritarian and pontifical leadership deriving from Buddhist cosmology and Sinhala-Buddhist traditions of kingship have been kept alive, i.e. been reproduced, in modern times despite the demise of monarchy (1815), the implantation of capitalism and the establishment of democratic political institutions from 1931.[1] To the extent that these several contentions are valid, their precise mix over time becomes a major subject for investigation.

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In pressing his criticism of the political system, Manor develops a sub-theme during his discussions of electoral politics in the era of 1931 to the 1950s: viz, that the networks maintained by individual notables rather than party machinery dominated the mobilisation of votes (pp. 74, 115-22, 168-184). This is an argument that has been developed earlier by Woodward (acknowledged rather belatedly by manor, on page 179). It is in Manor's discussion of this issue that a reader becomes aware of his principle yardsticks, his bias, one might say. Manor is an organisation man. He in effect requires that a modern political association must necessarily have spatially widespread and democratically-chosen central command which is responsive to pressures from the rank and file. Thus "[organisational] substance, based on democratic decision-making (such as, for example, the Congress in India after 1919)" is Manor's talisman (p. 143, also pp. 140, 147, 202, 208, 264).

Directed by this talisman, Manor finds that Bandaranaike's Sinhala Maha Sabha (1936-51) "possessed only very modest organisational substance" (p. 138). And he dismisses the Ceylon National Congress (1919-51) as "a loosely structured, undisciplined, unrepresentative, undemocratic and insubstantial thing" (p. 72, also pp. 73, 192-93).

There is a touch of the doctrinaire outsider here, swayed by his Eurocentric, liberal model. The art of politics, as Cavour would have reminded anyone, is the art of the possible. The possible is historically and culturally specific. In electoral politics in Sri Lanka in the period 1931-1950s, the kin, caste and friendship networks of magnates were adequate to secure election (and that was their goal, not democracy in the abstract). Likewise, the Ceylon National Congress was able to make a noise when required. From 1931, moreover, its role was supplementary to that of the Board of Ministers established under the Donoughmore constitution. The latter made the running in the efforts to secure the further devolution of power. Their pressures may not have been pragmatic and effective. They were tailored to British Ceylon's geo-political circumstances.

That, then, is the point: their specific relevance. Differences in scale render the comparison with India, however "natural," a misleading one. This comparison has been deployed by a long line of Ceylonese radicals and romantics from the 1940s and 1960s in order to belittle the achievements of the conservative politicians who pressed for the devolution of British authority from 1907 onwards. It was in their immediate political interest to do so. Without any such interest, an equally long line of foreign scholars have adopted this criticism hook, like and sinker. In joining this band, Manor ignores arguments that qualify and modify this line of criticism.

The fact is that in about 21 years, between 1907 and 1928, when the Donoughmore Report appeared, the pressures exerted by these moderate politicians had contributed towards constitutional reforms the like of which the Indian nationalists took fifty years, 1885 to 1935, to secure. To be sure, there were other factors which contributed to this result: *viz* (i) the vision of the Donoughmore Commissioners and Sidney Webb (Lord Passfield) for one; and (ii) the geo-political factor of the island's size, which, given the British naval power, encourages the British authorities to take greater risks than, say, in India. However, the Donoughmore Commission was sent out because the politicians had made the existing constitution, *established only in 1924*, unworkable. And the fact that these moderates spoke in the British idiom and displayed moderation may well have encouraged the British to be liberal in their devolutionary grants. It is a common, and valid, criticism that these moderates were opposed to universal suffrage when the issue was raised by the Donoughmore Commissioners. But it is forgotten that the leading players readily acquiesced in the recommendation to this effect by the Donoughmore Commission. They even suggested that the franchise qualification for women should be reduced from the age of 30 to 21, on a par with the men.

What is more, within a few months of the State Council taking its seats in 1931, these moderates demanded a further devolution of power. Their targets were the remaining institutional repositories of British power: the Governor's reserve powers and the three ex-officio ministers (British civil servants who had been quickly nicknamed "the three policemen"). While these demands did not get very far at the outset, the insistent and pragmatic politics directed by D.B. Jayatilaka and D.S. Senanayake has brought them on the verge of gaining a cabinet system of government without ex-officio ministers in 1938-39, when the second world war broke out and the issue was postponed. In brief, the war delayed Ceylon's progress towards independence.

In other words, Manor underestimates the pragmatic astuteness of D.S. Senanayake, W.A. de Silva and their associates. It was sagacity that led D.S. Senanayake *et al* to construct the Ceylon National Congress as "an umbrella organisation" and to resist the repeated efforts (by Amarasuriya, Kannangara, Bandaranaike *et al* in 1931-36 and by J.R. Jayewardene *et al* from 1938-43) to transform it into a party. The splits which occurred in the 1940s as a result of such efforts proved their point.

From our analytical position, further confirmation of their astuteness on this issue is provided by the character of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party in the years 1935-39. Though its leaders were aware of the deep rift between Trotskyists and Stalinists in their own ranks , the party was set up as a broad front of socialists seeking liberation from capitalist oppression as well as imperial rule. It was only the accident of the second world war and Stalinist Russia's allegiance with the Allies that enforced a break up of this front into its constituent units.

Notes

1 Roberts 1980. Because it is mimeographed this essay is not widely available outside Sri Lanka, but as a Ceylon Studies Seminar paper it should be known to aficionados. The paradigm termed "the Asokan Persona" is also clarified in Roberts 1984. Manor places some emphasis on the extent of defence shown in political and other circles in Sri Lanka (1989: 101, 205 & 264) in ways which support my thesis. He is wrong, however, in believing that deference decreases as one moves beyond the westernized elites. (p.101).

Letter

Murder Condoned

On 22 April 1992, a woman undergraduate of the University of Kelaniya, Maduwanthi Gunewardena, was stabbed to death inside the campus premises, looked on by fellow undergraduates and university security staff. It may be assumed that it took time for Maduwanthi to die, since she did manage to break away and flee from her assailant, but was pursued through the campus grounds and struck with a knife repeatedly, until she was dead. No attempt was made to stop Maduwanthi from being killed. However, after the murder, the killer was prevented from taking poison by his fellow students.

The murder was publicised in the media in a manner which regarded the incident in terms of a tragic love affair or a crime of passion, while various reasons were put forward to 'explain' the actions of the killer. Some members of the student community expounded theories which justified the act of murder, particularly, in view of the relationship between Maduwanthi and her killer (as they saw it). Even the public at large when referring to the incident felt that Maduwanthi was murdered due to *her* actions as highlighted in the media and that a certain amount of sympathy was due to her murderer.

What disturbed us is the comfortable ability of our society to explain away murder. As '*Women Against Violence Against Women*', we see the slaying of Maduwanthi as part of the continuum of violence against women, particularly, in view of the fact that a Peradeniya undergraduate was stabbed to death last year, and a Colombo woman undergraduate was subjected to physical abuse on campus, a week after Maduwanthi's murder. We perceive a growing pattern of violent victimisation of women within personal relationships - specially as a mode of revenge - not only in the universities but elsewhere as well.

We condemn this gross act of violence and the justifications of it. Murder cannot be justified or explained away, whatever the reason. We see these explanations for the killing as a violation of women's rights. Women are being denied the right to express themselves, specially the right to say no. Women like Maduwanthi who do say no, are being made to pay for that choice with their lives. In other words, women who dare to make a choice or act against social 'norms' are publicly condemned and made to live in constant fear of violence, rape and death.

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Printed at Karunaratne & Sons Ltd.