

SRI LANKAFROM NEW YORK

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It is only because people outside Sri Lanka have accepted racist interpretations of what is going on in our country and have allowed their governments to contribute to the holocaust that the agony has gone on for so long (L.Piyadasa, *Sri Lanka, The Unfinished Quest for Peace*, 1988).

In the past month, several people have made comments to me which point to the image being created of Sri Lanka here in the U.S.A. One US citizen asked, "what's happening in Sri Lanka?; there's so little news, things must be better now" A Sri Lankan asked, "Is it true that both (President) Bush and (Governor) Clinton have mentioned Sri Lanka in the course of the election campaign?" These comments may seem to indicate some contradiction, but in fact they hit on the two main characteristics of the image being created. There is a dearth of news coverage

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of events in Sri Lanka - a trend which has taken hold in the past two years. The US press seems to have adopted an editorial policy which promotes, by omission, the image of a good investment climate in Sri Lanka's quickly liberalizing economy. At the same time, and especially in the past few months, Sri Lanka has been referred to in ways that trivialise, and thus denigrate, the country and its people. The presidential candidates, mirrored by the ad masters of Madison Avenue, have inserted the name "Sri Lanka" in their campaign promotions.

After the suppression of the 'JVP' in late 1989, it was clear to many that a concerted effort had to be made to improve the international image of the country. The government recognized this need, and in mid-1991 appointed a 15- member National Information Strategy and Coordinating Committee; one of its tasks would be to work on 'external public relations'. This effort, however, had been under way for over a year. In April 1990, it was

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9. The symbol of the National Front is similar to that of the MSI (Movimento Sociale Italiano - the rightist party which succeeded fascism); many of its themes are reminiscent of those of the old *Parti Populiste Francaise* of Jacques Doriot (an ex-communist worker who, during the Nazi occupation, embraced National-Socialist positions).
10. N. Mayer, "De Passy a Barbes: deux Visage du Vote Le Pen a Paris", in *Revue Francaise de Science Politique*, No. 37, 1987.
11. In *Le Monde*, (May 26, 1987).
12. Brigitta Orfali, *L'Adhesion au Front National* (Paris Editions Kime, 1990).
13. Interview in "Europe I" (February 3, 1987).
14. Charlot, M. "L'emergence du Front National," in *Revue Francaise de Science Politique*, No 36, 1986.
15. Other Leagues founded in Veneto or Piedmont were characterised by their defense of various aspects of culture, traditions and regional dialects, and have received a considerable number of votes without, however, ever becoming politically significant at a national level.
16. Vimercati points out that "with 1990 the Lombard League unleashed what has now become its battlecry: the rejection of uncontrolled immigration. As time goes on, the number of those who turn to the 'Lumbard' for help against the 'Black invasion' is growing." *Daniele Vimercati, I Lombardi alla Nuova Crociata* (Milan: Mursia, 1990).
17. According to Bossi, the projected autonomy should be predicated on three great "Republics," and not on individual regions. The coexistence of the original League project (federal regionalism) within the Northern League raises a number of problems.
18. There are many examples: Bossi claims that the "head" of the Mafia operates within the Christian Democratic Party: both the Front and the League accuse industrial and political sectors of favoring immigration for electoral and speculative reasons.
19. On the occasion of the referendum concerning the modification of the system of preferences of June 1991, Bossi asked the electors to abstain, arguing that the only meaningful vote was for the League.
20. Even in local elections there have been many clashes concerning candidates between local representatives and the League's national leadership. The latter's positions have always prevailed, even at the cost of serious breaks.
21. Many commentators have erroneously underestimated the League's vindication of the "nation," first to Lombardy and then to other regions, as well as the efforts to emphasize its historical, linguistic and cultural bases, i.e., the "mentality" of the Lombards and of "the people of the Po Valley."
22. To justify proposals to slow down immigration, Roberto Ronchi, the League's expert on the matter, claims that "a multi-racial society produces a break of the equilibria necessary to human beings, compromises its natural need for collective identity thus resulting in social disintegration," Quoted in Vimercati (See Note 16).
23. M.A. Confalonieri, "L'Altra Faccia dell'Europa: Varieta di Populismi Xenofobi," in *Ulisse*, No 6, 1991.
24. During this past year the existence of this political space has led the MSI (*Moviment Sociale Italiano*), in the wake of its decline in the 1990 elections, to follow the national-populist path. Under Fini's leadership, and within the context of the attacks that the President of the Republic, Cossiga, has unleashed against the traditional parties, the MSI is attempting to follow the populist model. Notwithstanding profound differences with the Northern League concerning national unity, the two parties have often found themselves together, especially in the mobilisation of the base against the presence of immigrants and in the violent polemic against the partitocracy. Yet the MSI is unlikely to succeed in this project because of the lingering connection in Italian public opinion with the defeated fascist regime.

reported that US House Representative Robert G. Torricelli (Democrat, New Jersey), at a meeting with Sri Lankan expatriates, had urged Sri Lanka to mount "an intense public relations campaign" on Sri Lanka in the US (*Daily News*, 16 April 1990) [Mr. Toricelli, by the way, is on the committee headed by former Rep. Stephen Solarz.] In the same month, it was reported that CNN would begin airing a three minute weekly program, featuring Rupavahini pieces on such topics as: cultural traditions, independence day celebrations, making Mickey Mouse toys in the FTZ, the departure of the IPKF, and the presidential mobile service in Puttalam (*Island*, 19 April 1990).

Also in the spring of 1990, a variety of foreigners added their two bits in criticism of the current publicity. The *Daily News* (17th March 1990) published a letter from Ms. Karen Krauss, the daughter of a US Senator, who had been in the country for three weeks. Krauss extolled this "exotic land of yours," further adding that "nowhere have I seen such friendly people, wonderful landscapes, unspoiled beaches, sunsets and unforgettable monuments." Getting to the crux of the matter she stated:

I may have come here sooner if not for the bad press you have abroad, the exaggerated nonsense propagated by bodies like Amnesty International... and the false picture of the situation here drawn I suppose by one or two of your disgruntled politicians who shamelessly pretend that mothers are living in mortal fear.

In April 1990, the Production Manager of a French TV crew, doing filming in Sri Lanka for the 'Sirocco' program, stated: "We heard there were problems in Sri Lanka before we arrived but we did not encounter any on our trips here" (*Island*: 15 April 1990). In May, the Chinese and Soviet delegates who had come to Sri Lanka to participate in May Day festivities similarly stated that before their arrival they heard many, mostly adverse, reports, but that now the situation was different:

Your people are now happy, they smile, they talk freely and specially after the IPKF has pulled out, peace has returned to your country (*Sun*, 15 May 1990)

In the same month, a young West German woman who was finishing off a six-month stay in Sri Lanka stated: "It is a pity that Sri Lanka is so badly projected in Germany... It is a pity that no efforts are made to counteract bad publicity." Many people in Germany, it seemed, still thought that a war was going on, but she herself had "found peace here." She concluded:

I have only pleasant memories to take back with me. Knowing a country is understanding a country, and I have now come to understand Sri Lanka (*Island*, 5 May 1990).

A British travel writer for the Singapore magazine *Tourism Asia*, after twelve days in the country, determined that Sri Lanka was an ideal place for a family holiday, especially since children were treated so very well in the hotels (*Daily News*, 12 May 1990).

During 1991 and 1992, there were several more such references. A retired high school principal from Connecticut concluded after a visit to that turbulent country" (*West Hartford News*, 14 March 1991).

Be that as it may, from my vantage point, there has been a noticeable decline in news coverage on Sri Lanka. The editors of the *New York Times*, for example, have evidently decided that events in Sri Lanka do not constitute news that is (as printed on the masthead) "fit to print." I may have missed one or two articles, but so far in 1992 count just six:

- photo with caption, Sinhalese women in Colombo protesting human rights abuses (17 March)
- 1 small paragraph, clash in Mannar (20 April)
- 7 killed in northeast bombing of Hindu temple (21 May)
- 13 small paragraphs, deaths of Major General Kobbekaduwa et. al. (9 August)
- 1 small paragraph, massacre of Muslims in Polonnaruwa district (16 October)

Anecdotal information points to a decline in coverage in other regional daily papers, such as the *Baltimore Sun*.

The articles listed above are noteworthy on two counts: the subject matter and the lack of information provided. Almost all deal with incidents of killing which are essentially viewed as isolated events. Just another ethnic conflict, folks. The captioned photo gives the only indication that something is going on in areas to the south of this conflict, and the caption refers only to abuses committed during the crackdown against the JVP.

That this type of coverage is a product of editorial policy is shown by the large quantity of wire service reports available, many of which are quite lengthy. In the first six months of 1992 alone, a quick count shows the following number of filings:

Reuter	more than 200
Xinhua	at least 45
DPA	at least 45
AP	at least 25
UPI	at least 20

(This is not to mention the reports and analyses which have been issued by more specialized viewers.)

The references to Sri Lanka that have filled this gap would be absurdly amusing if one could forget the real



goings on. Yes, candidate Bill Clinton did make a reference to Sri Lanka. The *New York Times* quotes him as stating in his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention:

Now, under President Bush, America has an unpleasant economy stuck somewhere between Germany and Sri Lanka (17 July, 1992).

I missed George Bush's reference, but according to a person who listens to National Public Radio, in several speeches Bush has chided all those who think that the US economy is somewhere between X country and Sri Lanka.

Bush, intelligence man that he is, and one who has held high office for a while, can be assumed to know a fair amount about the political and economic situation in the country. It may even be that Bush picked up the Sri Lanka idea from Clinton. It is highly doubtful that Clinton has his extent of knowledge. Regardless of either's level of knowledge, both candidates made clear the image of a Sri Lanka at the bottom of the bottom. And both probably hold quite similar views on the advantages to the US of Sri Lanka's present economic course.

There have been enough of this type of comment in recent months. The *New York Times*, in an editorial refuting popular fears that the US/Canada/Mexico free trade pact will cause US companies to depart for low wage Mexico, tellingly stated: "If low wages siphoned away businesses, Sri Lanka would rule the international economy" (9 August 1992).

The advertising world, too, has inserted its particular spin; witness these two quite recent examples:

A Burger King/Coke TV ad highlights a new promotion: buy a coke at Burger King and get a glass for free. An older married couple is shown who are amassing a collection of free glasses. The woman picks up one and says, "We got this one when we met that nice couple from Sri Lanka" (NBC, 16 August 1992).

A sprint telephone company TV ad promotes a new overseas phoning service. Three or four 'average' citizens say whom they will call. A young, friendly-looking Sri Lankan man says, "I'll call my sister in Sri Lanka" (CBS, 13 October 1992).

Another example of how its almost hip now to mention Sri Lanka can be found in the *New York Times* daily crossword puzzle, where the following clue to a three-letter word is given often enough,—" Lanka."

It seems that the art world has also fixed some more attention on Sri Lanka. A recent report tells of a comedian on TV referring to Sri Lanka. And one can only marvel at the timing of a new exhibit at the Smithsonian's Sackler Gallery in Washington DC. The 52-piece exhibit on "The Golden Age of Sculpture from Sri Lanka" will run for eleven months, and according to one announcement shows "ancient Buddhist works" from the country with the "longest continuous history of Buddhist worship of any nation in the world." (*Amtrak Express*, November/December 1992, first item on the "Et Cetera, Et Cetera" Page).

Perhaps in the politician's references, the point is to convince the audience of some broader knowledge; if the candidate knows about Sri Lanka, it may be assumed that he is well-informed and /or intelligent in general. In the advertising references, the point may be to increase the name recognition of Sri Lanka in order to promote a positive image for investment and tourism purposes. After all, just five and a half years ago, CBS nightly news anchorman Dan Rather reported to the nation that a massive number of "Sinhalese tribesmen" [sic] had been killed in attacks on three buses near Trincomalee (CBS News, 20 April 1987). For the next few years, the news image could only be one of increasing carnage, and shocking carnage at that.

Now, again - just as in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when organized thuggery was ignored - we here are being fed with images of nice and friendly Sri Lankans - from a country that is a Third World basket case, but which has its cultural heritage nonetheless. What is actually happening in the country is of no significance, including the circumstances of Sri Lanka's entry as a functioning cog in investment portfolios. By omission, support is being given. In the meantime, if the name of Sri Lanka is denigrated, that's business, here in the land of slick politicians, mediamegaliths and advertisers (and it's hard to separate the three). And actually, you can't have it both ways; all is trivialised and support for business as usual is covert.

Such references, should not be taken as stemming from any serious thoughts about Sri Lanka.

They can only be described as flippant and trivialising, and self-serving.