# 'A Journey Through Memories'[1]

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Perera, S 2016, *Violence and the Burden of Memory: Remembrance and Erasure in Sinhala Consciousness*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, pp. 322, $ 29.00.

The opening episode of Sasanka Perera's new book, *Violence and the Burden of Memory; remembrance and Erasure in Sinhala Consciousness* is about his own memory of a school friend, Anura. An intrepid young man, Anura joined the Sri Lankan army, and became a folk hero for his daredevil actions in the battlefield, hunting down LTTE snipers. Before long Anura, riding atop an open military jeep in his usual style, was the target of an LTTE sniper. Anura probably died before death in the war and became an object of ritualistic public remembrance, sponsored by the state, or by voluntary groups. As in many other similar cases, his immediate family may have had private memorials at home, with his photograph in military uniform. In the absence of a dedicated public monument, the memory of Anura, as Sasanka Perera notes, slowly moved into the zone of erasure. However, and before long, when the degree of violence intensified with huge numbers of war deaths and soldiers missing in action, Sri Lanka's public culture of war began to produce war memorials along with an officially promoted new discourse of war heroes. These memorials were initially established not to celebrate any particular war victory, because there were no victories to celebrate at that time. They were established to publicly remember as a gesture of thanksgiving for, as well as glorification of, the casualties of combatants and the armed forces in general.

When the ethnic civil war intensified, the Sri Lankan state, society, and public culture also became militarized. And then, the remembering of the dead combatants became thoroughly political, a part of a new culture of war induced collective rituals. Remembrance thus moved out of its private meanings and articulations, assuming the character of a publicly ritualized act enacted for the nation, the state, and sovereignty.

Sri Lanka's ethnic war that began in the early 1980s initially had three independent strands of memorializing the dead. The LTTE's *mahavira* ('martyrs') project constituted the first organized remembrance of dead combatants in spectacular and dramatic public rituals. Massive and exceedingly well maintained war cemeteries, public monuments and parks, and the annual *mahavira* day were the main components of an ongoing politico-military spectacle. In fact, the *mahavira* day was also the moment in which the LTTE leader pronounced an important and surprise political message to the Tamil people as well as the adversary, the Sri Lankan state. The LTTE, as grudgingly accepted by its critics in the Sinhalese South, knew how to look after its dead. The highly militarized memorialization of dead combatants reinforced that belief.

For the LTTE, such memorial spectacles had an instrumental purpose. They were a strategic component of the LTTE's nationalist mobilizational culture of war. They served the objective of military recruitment as well. In a military culture that began to be increasingly marked by suicide attacks, and when war itself became something like organized suicide, glorification of death in combat was something the LTTE mastered during the early phase of the war. The second strand was inaugurated by the Sri Lankan state in the mid-1990s, somewhat later than when the LTTE launched its spectacular rituals. There were several reasons why the Sri Lankan state was late to promote its own culture of military remembrances. Since the government initially thought that the war would not be a protracted affair, there was no institutional impetus for remembrance of dead soldiers. Victory monuments were perhaps what may have figured in the official thinking. However, when the war became unwinnable, protracted and complex, desertion among soldiers became a difficult issue to handle, and military recruitment became challenging, the political and defence establishments seemed to have realized the utilitarian value of promoting a culture of honouring the combatants who lost their lives in war. Quite interestingly, the official discussions on state sponsored national memorials began during the mid-1990s. In this project too, nationalism and militarism

shaped the framework of imagination; yet, as the reader can gather from Perera's book, the government has always been either ambivalent or careful to not present it exclusively in a discourse of militarism. The ideology of war for peace had entered the discourse of war memorials too, with a symbol of peace—often a dove, sitting with unease atop the gun which the soldier carries.

The third strand was remembering the civilian victims of political violence through public monuments. These were initiatives taken by political and human rights activists. They were also part of a progressive public culture of resistance in an extremely difficult context of political violence, state repression, and the glorification of the semi-militarized state. Understandably, this remained a minor strand of remembrance, often facing the threat of being destroyed, as it actually happened to the Shrine of the Innocents erected in Colombo.

Sasanka Perera presents a comprehensive set of accounts and analyses of these and other aspects of the memories and memorials of war, their public and private manifestations as well as their erasure, raising and answering a whole range of macro and micro questions. The general, overarching question that has animated this study is; what exactly are we to do with the past and what constitutes memory? In the specific context of Sri Lanka, Perera focuses on how memory works in three specific contexts (a) the construction of monuments and memorials, both as collective enterprises and individual efforts in public and private space (b) the intervention of visual artists through painting, sculpture and installations and (c) activities of individuals and occasionally collectives in ritualizing memory in private domains which may also percolate into the public space (p. 7–8).

Chapters of this book are enormously rich with ethnographic accounts, the author's own mediations, reflections and commentary, and cross-thematic conversations that the author engages his objects of inquiry with. Therefore, summarizing its chapters or the vast range of arguments they contain is no easy task. At the risk of losing the depth and flavour of Sasanka Perera's microscopic accounts and analyses, let me try to present brief snapshots of its chapters.

In Chapter I, which is relatively brief in length, Perera discusses the idea of the 'burden of memory'. In a literary style that is somewhat akin to the style of a piece of visual art with a complex array of lines, light, shadows and figures, the reader's attention is drawn to the complexity of memory in a society ravaged and torn apart by war, violence, vengeance, remembrance, forgetting, selectivity, and just neglect. Why memory during and after war? Whose memory? What memory? What happens to memory? Public and private monuments that have emerged as symbols of a new public culture of war in Sri Lanka during the past few decades do not provide easy answers to any of these questions. As the author suggests in this opening chapter, and elaborates in all the subsequent chapters, the answers are partial, subjective, incomplete, and of course plural.

Chapter II examines the links as well as tensions between celebrating heroism and glorifying death. The author does this by, as he calls it, "travel[ling] across the landscapes of monumental memory" (p. 22). Perera thus closely reads the post-1980s monuments in Sri Lanka with an eye for detail. While doing so, he also engages with a range of theoretical literature in order to establish a series of interpretative arguments. Monuments help overcome the limitations of language in narrating experiences of pain (p. 22). Monuments also need to be read carefully in relation to their specific social and political history, because those histories themselves are commentaries about their existence. Thus, monuments also lose their original meanings despite their continued existence (p. 22–23). Their function as repositories of memory is fragile and alterable. This possibility of erasure constitutes a specific burden of memory. Perera presents extensive discussions on the monuments within military camps and police barracks and the ones set up in public spaces, ostensibly to argue that any interpretation of the life and politics of each monument itself is a part of our burden of memory.

The theme of Chapter III is remembering death as an act of mourning for lost innocence. The chapter's main focus is on two monuments erected for the memory of victims of state violence during the 1980s in the Sinhalese South amidst the counter-insurgency war against the JVP-led armed rebellion. They were established not to glorify military heroism and death in war as in the case of the culture of "the war hero" memorialization, but to remind the society of the "loss of innocence" amidst war and violence and the need for "mourning the loss of life" (p. 145).

The title of the chapter is taken from a monument erected in Colombo during the mid-1990s which the artist who made it called 'The Shrine of the Innocents'. The establishment of this 'shrine' was the culmination of a public campaign by parents and relatives of a group of school children who were abducted and killed by the military in 1988 in Sri Lanka's Deep South. The Political space for the setting up of the monument was opened up by the regime change that occurred in

1994. As it happened in Sri Lanka during the civil war, a regime change usually occurs with a promise by the new rulers to champion human rights and peace. That is how the Shrine of the Innocents received the support and patronage of the People's Alliance regime of 1994. But when a regime change of a different kind occurred in 2005 with the advent of Mahinda Rajapaksa and his brothers as the new ruling family with militaristic intent, it spelt doom for the Shrine. Perera maps out this tragedy of the monument with a great deal of sensitivity to the politics and politicization of monumentalization that are constructed as a critique of the state and the war-making mandate of its agencies. Perera also presents a critique of the aesthetic ambience of the shrine, its detachment from the public due to locational politics, its collaboration with the political agenda of a ruling party, and the domineering and unilateral role of the artist who designed and constructed it in determining the overall aesthetic economy of the Shrine.

Perera contrasts the Monument for the Disappeared built in Seeduwa with the Shrine of the Innocents to make the point that the former's continuing political presence in a semi-urban, working class neighbourhood was made possible by the fact that the monument was "the logical culmination of a historical and political process that had gathered momentum over a decade" (p.131). That organic connection with the society and a social movement, Perera argues, has also ensured the survival of the Monument for the Disappeared as a credible site of memory. It also possessed another quality that the Shrine of the Innocents lacked. It was supported by an institutional structure, directly linked to an organizational network of individuals and groups of working class men and women from the area where it is located.

The movement for monumentalizing the dead also gave rise to a fairly widespread practice of private rituals of memory, largely confined to the family and the private space, away from the public gaze. Perera in Chapter IV discusses in detail instances where 'disappearance', a common phenomenon that occurred during the ethnic war as well as the military crackdown against the JVP insurgency, posed a complex emotional and cultural challenge to surviving families. Uncertainty about what actually happened to the 'disappeared' family member and the absence of the body made it difficult for the family members to perform the culturally mandated rituals connected to death. The absence of the body also fed into the hopes of the family and friends of the return of the disappeared. The state's reluctance to certify the death of the disappeared, due to legal and political complexities, made the situation still more agonizing for the victims' families. The phenomenon of disappearance made emotional and cultural closure difficult in many cases for a long time. Perera shows how in such unusual circumstances, the families of the disappeared had to invent new practices of funeral rituals and mourning, temporarily assuming, with the permission of Buddhist monks, that the death of the loved one had occurred. In such situations, the rituals of memory tended to be rather private, often limited to the members of the immediate family. For the family, the date of the disappearance was also the effective date of death. Did these private practices of mourning and memory constitute a counter narrative to the state, invoking a private political act of resistance? Although Perera is reluctant to explore this question directly, his account suggests that they did.

Such private monuments inside homes also constitute the spread of what Perera calls a practice of "subaltern monument construction", one feature of which the book documents in some detail; the relocation of private monuments in neighborhood cemeteries, roadsides, and bus shelters to accord them a public presence, in order to ensure that memories are not faded in private mourning. This was an attempt to address the fear of erasure of the memory; yet it is also fraught with problems and contradictions. In public spaces, they are often reduced to objects of curiosity. Without community support, they run the risk of disappearing before long.

Chapter V is a discussion of how Sri Lanka's visual art has responded to war and political violence. Perera at the beginning of the chapter dissociates himself from the assumption that visual art should be viewed as a political or social narrative representing all the complexities of a moment or a context. For him, it is better to look at visual art "as an active domain of memory contextualized within the paradigm of the political and social history of recent times" (p. 211). In other words, contemporary visual art in Sri Lanka are "repositories of violent memory" and the work of art should be evaluated as such. Sri Lanka's visual art movement of the 1990s marked the beginning of artistic investigation of the self, and the experience of encountering the consequences of organized violence. The works of individual artists discussed in this chapter belong to Jagath Weerasinghe, Chandragutha Thenuwara, Chamika Jayawardena, and Anoli Perera. The works of three group projects are commented upon towards the end of the chapter, namely the Peace Train in memory of Neelan Tiruchelvam, the Flag project by the Artists Against War, and the Aham Puram exhibition jointly initiated by the Colombo-based Theertha

International Artists' Collective and the Jaffna-based SETHU Study Site for Visual Culture. The latter group included a number of new visual artists who emerged in Jaffna amidst war and violence.

In Chapter VI, which is the final chapter, Perera offers the reader his concluding thoughts. He begins the chapter by problematizing the very idea of conclusion in a book which is a "journey through memories". In his concluding thoughts, Perera reflects on what he calls "the fragility of memory", despite the structures and institutions that have been created to carry the burden of memory across time and generations.

It is difficult to classify Sasanka Perera's book as a text that belongs to any specific genre of Social Science scholarship. Perera himself calls it a "journey … through landscapes and signposts of memory". If we take it as a 'journey book', then it also explains the frequent presence of the author's own responses and judgments in the commentaries about monuments or works of art he analyses, at the expense of the voices of the people whom he may have met throughout the journey. Some readers might see this as a drawback in the methodological strategy Perera has opted for. Each chapter also raises a large number of questions that were obviously simmering in the author's own mind, but readers might find it difficult to connect with many of them. The microscopic details given on monuments and works of art under discussion too run the risk of being viewed by the reader as a little too tedious.

Moreover, although Perera does not acknowledge it, the memorials and monuments that have been spawned in public as well as private spaces in Sri Lanka constitute an exceptional aesthetic culture that try to respond to, and make meanings about, violence in diverse and often contradictory ways. They are an integral part of the country's public discourse, ideologies, as well as the political critique. That perhaps is another dimension of the burden of memory warranting some reflection. In fact, there is still space left in the book to theorize the idea of the burden of memory.

These are minor shortcomings of a very important contribution Sasanka Perera has made to the understanding of what has happened in Sri Lanka during a nearly three-decades long phase of war, violence, and bloodshed. The value of this work is particularly felt when one considers the relative silence that Sri Lankan Social Science scholars have maintained on deeply felt domains of human experience amidst war and violence. Sasanka Perera has shown an abiding commitment to documenting and commenting on themes which his Sri Lankan colleagues have largely ignored. As early as 1995, he published a pioneering work called *Living with Torturers and other Interventions*. Then in 1999, he published a book on the stories of survivors of political violence in Sri Lanka's Sinhalese South. His third book, *Warzone Tourism in Sri Lanka* came out just last year. The latest is the fourth by the author on the general theme of coping with violence and the memories of violence in Sri Lanka.

**Notes**

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