

# NOTES AND COMMENTS

## CULTURAL COMMEMORATIONS OR DISASTERS ?

We have commented in past issues of *Pravada* on the relationship between the arts and the state and have been generally critical of its nature and operation. A most glorious example of the inevitable ill effects of this relationship, either inept or partisan, is provided by some of the exhibitions and concerts organized by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the country's independence.

There is, for example, an exhibition of art organized by the Painting and Sculpture Panel of the Arts Council at the Art Gallery. This exhibition consists of two parts: one, of 173 paintings submitted for a competition and, two, of 102 paintings and 17 pieces of sculpture selected from what are described in the catalogue as "eminent" painters and sculptors. These numbers mean that the walls of the gallery are seriously overcrowded and that no painting can stand out.

The Rev. Mapalagama Vipulasara is the Chairman of this panel; we can now recognize him if we meet him because his portrait is one of the exhibits. The members of the panel are selected and appointed by the Minister; they work under the guidance of the bureaucrats in the Culture ministry. To judge by this exhibition, it does not appear that either of these groups have any intelligent knowledge of art and its modern developments or any sense of good taste.

The selection of paintings does not indicate any kind of thematic coherence. An exhibition designed to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of independence could have been devoted to show developments in painting and sculpture over this period; it does not do that. It could have been an exhibition of good and important paintings created during this period; it is not that. Painters like Justin Deraniyagala are not represented at all; others like George Keyt, Ivan Pieris, Manjusri or David Paynter are represented by lone or not very good examples of their work. It could have been a display of the best work that is being currently done; it is not that either. The best artists currently working like Jagath Weerasinghe and Nelun Harasgama are not represented at all. The exhibition thus has no kind of concept behind it. It then becomes a miscellaneous collection of paintings and sculpture, a few of good quality and a vast majority of mediocrities.

Having failed to deduce any kind of meaning from the exhibits themselves, we turned to statements in the souvenir issued for the exhibition in an attempt to find out its rationale; for this purpose, we reproduce some extracts exactly as they appear. It should be noted that this is not the catalogue which was the only document issued to normal visitors.

The Minister of Cultural Affairs says:

It was during the period of campaign for national freedom of Sri Lanka that steps were taken for revival of the traditions of our painting and sculpture which deteriorated heavily during the colonial period.

He speaks therefore of the "resurgence of national art traditions".

Professor Suraweera, Deputy Minister says:

During the foreign domination, creative merits of local artists declined to the lowest ebb ever in the history of Sri Lanka. After gaining independence in 1948, all governments which were returned to office have implemented projects to uplift the painting and sculpture tradition as an important media of art.

Mr. K. Jayatilaka, President of the Arts Council says:

In developing art and literature in a country two factors are of vital importance; First is that they should be firmly rooted in the local traditions. Any attempt to develop them without considering this can be compared to building a house without a foundation...

The Rev. Mapalagama Vipulasara says:

It is evident from History that Religious and Educational systems in Sri Lanka have gradually taken a Western look after Sri Lanka came under British Rule, in 1815. Specially the progress in Arts and Crafts preserved in temples during the latter part of the Kandyan Era now shows a down trend. This is due to Foreign Education and Building construction systems applied to new industries according to Western systems. After free independence in 1948 it became necessary to turn back and view the state of the local culture. In 1950, after the formation of the Jatika Kala Peramuna under our leadership in association with the National Art Gallery, it was possible to create a new environment by the enlivening of the National Art again and by the upliftment of the standard of the national artist and redeveloping of the National Art sections. The exercise of the Kala Peramuna to spotlight errors in art subjected to give a Western look in ancient art prevalent in temples and redoing them according to local traditional art became a great success. The present state of progress appears to be the result of this.

We know it is rather difficult to derive a coherent philosophy of art from these statements. Nevertheless, they all show a concern with indigenous tradition and its revival or resurgence. And by tradition they appear to mean the temple painting of the Kandyan period. There is no understanding of the social base of art and the place that art should occupy in a developing multi-cultural democracy. This attitude of course has dominated the selection.

It cannot totally ignore modern art; but it can accept it only up to a point - Victorian naturalism and socialist realism.

The exhibition truly grieved and pained us; a visitor to the exhibition might conclude that there is no production of good art in the country and that the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and its minions have no conception of art either. Better to have had no exhibition at all rather than this display. If this is the result of the implementation of all kinds of projects by all kinds of governments since independence, then far better that nothing had been done.

Another inept display was a performance, identified as a ballet, of *Lankabhimani*, sponsored by various state and semi-state organizations, performed at the BMICH and televised live over Rupavahini. Again, there was difficulty in guessing what was going on on the stage or what was intended. From the declamatory preface, it looked to be a potted history of Sri Lanka from Ravana to independence; there was no other discernible theme, even though there were some chronoclasms that put Parakramabahu ahead of Dutugemunu and Kasyapa.

This kind of pageant can only have some value if a fresh point of view is brought to bear on the historical record or if its superbly written, choreographed and performed. There were none of these things in what we saw. What we heard was dull; what we saw was not dancing but inept posturing.

There is another pageant that is being organised by the Tower Hall Foundation called "The Quest for Independence"; from what we have read, it too appears to center round another selection of events from Sri Lankan history starting from the Vijaya-Kuveni story.

What are these persons trying to celebrate - 50 years of independence and its achievements or actually the dawn of independence? We have been looking at some records of the pageant that was devised and presented on the 5th of February 1948; its form and content are given in Devar Surya Sena's autobiography. It seems to us that the present pageants are merely reproducing the idea. An unkind commentator might come to one of many possible conclusions: there have been no significant cultural or artistic advances over the last fifty years; there is no significant production of art today; the state has been unable to promote any flowering of the arts. What he might not conclude is that state functionaries dealing with this sphere are either unable or unwilling, for many reasons, to recognise true art when they see it.

That there is vibrant and good art being produced today will be evident to any person who takes the trouble to walk across to the Lionel Wendt Gallery where a number of artists are showing their work under the title "In dependence".

The state sponsored cultural productions were nothing short of disasters. They did not reflect our past, did not evaluate what had gone wrong, did not show the way towards a multi-cultural future. The potted history of Lankabhimani was simply a history of the Sinhalese, erasing out of existence the other ethnic groups. This is in total opposition to the ideas in the President's speech to the nation. If the perpetration of such disasters is all that the state is capable of, then the sooner the state removes itself from this sphere the better.

The lack of taste and the ignorance of the cultural bureaucracy is in sharp contrast to the artistic knowledge and good taste of the President who invited Channa Wijewardena and his troupe to perform at the state banquet that she gave to visiting dignitaries.

### Plantations

**T**he privatised plantations are again at the center of attention. The wage freeze negotiated in 1996 came to an end at the end of 1997. Fresh negotiations are now going on and have led to threats of a prolonged strike if the demand for a daily wage of Rs.105 is not met.

Meanwhile, the many structural problems faced by this sector, which still remains a vital part of the economy, are not being addressed in a holistic way.

We publish in this issue several articles dealing with these issues.

We also publish an article by Valentine Daniel which points to the social and political problems faced by plantation workers who are still tied to the estates in various ways. Even if the wage problems are settled, the question of the reintegration of these people, as free labour, into the society and polity of Sri Lanka would remain.

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