

Pravāda

Vol. 7 No. 2

Rs. 25.00

ISBN 1391-104X

NOTES AND COMMENTS 03

SINHALESE-MUSLIM RIOTS OF 1915 05

CAPACITY BUILDING, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND HUMANITARIANISM 07
Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi de Alwis

THE PERFECT WINDOW 11
Gopalkrishna Gandhi

DR. S.A. WICKREMASINGHE 13
Premalal Kumarasiri

FOCUS ON CRICKET

CRICKET WITH A PLOT 17
Suvendrini Perera

SHOWING THE FLAG AND RUNNING THE GAUNTLET 25
Michael Roberts

CRICKET AS GLOBAL AND HONOURABLE 26
Michael Roberts

MURALI'S MATCH 27
Chris Searle

BAMIYAN REVISITED 30

SPEECH OF JUSTICE VIGNESWARAN 33

Pravada in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

ETHNIC RELATIONS LESSONS FROM MAWANELLA

The complexity of the political management of Sri Lanka's ethnic relations has been once again brought to the fore by the recent events in Mawanella and Maradana. This time around, the issues of contention involved the Sinhalese and Muslim communities. The tension and violence in Mawanella between Sinhalese and Muslim traders was precipitated by an initial incident where the security guards of a Sinhalese politician had an altercation with a Muslim shop owner. Police as well as political inaction to take immediate and appropriate measures to prevent the spread of tension resulted in the swift turning of violence into a Sinhalese-Muslim communal riot. Traders belonging to the two communities and their hurriedly organized gangs appear to have gone on rampage in the Mawanella town, targeting shops and commercial property.

The tension in Mawanella, with its communal twist, made its presence felt in Colombo when some Muslims in Maradana went on a protest demonstration, after their Friday prayer meeting. There, the police intervened to stop the demonstration, a development that further intensified tension. The government's declaration of curfew for a day on that Friday curtailed further incidents, but not the political tension. A few days later, a group of Sinhalese nationalists launched a counter demonstration, demanding that the Sinhalese traders who lost property in Mawanella should be compensated. Behind this compensation demand was an attempt at anti-minority mobilization. The police intervened there too, breaking up the

demonstration. A few days later, the debate shifted from the streets to the legislative chamber when parliament met to debate the monthly emergency declaration motion. What became quite clear in the parliamentary debate is that a minor incident of altercation could easily trigger off communal violence and that there are no mechanisms whatsoever to monitor, arrest and immediately bring under control incidents that may have potential to spread as communal violence.

There are a number of lessons to be learned from the incidents of Mawanella and their subsequent appropriation by political groups with opportunistic agendas. The first concerns the political management of inter-ethnic relations in the context of a protracted ethnic conflict. Relations among Sinhalese-Tamil, Sinhalese-Muslim and Tamil-Muslim communities have been marred by sentiments of insecurity, mutual suspicion and jealousy. The North-East war and its consequences constitute one aspect of the context in which inter-communal relations have been redefined. The perceived partiality of the state in relation to ethnic groups is yet another dimension. This works in a seemingly contradictory logic. Extreme Sinhalese nationalist groups believe that the state has abandoned the majority in favor of Tamil and Muslim minorities. They indeed demonstrate a distinct measure of anger against the state and the PA regime for 'bartering' the interests of the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority to secure minority electoral support. In their political propaganda, the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority community is portrayed

Pravāda

Vol. 7 No. 2, 2001

Editors

Jayadeva Uyangoda
Kumari Jayawardena

Executive Editor and Circulation Manager

Rasika Chandrasekera

Pravada is published monthly by:

Pravada Publications
425/15, Thimbirigasyaya Road,
Colombo 5, Sri Lanka.
Telephone. 501339, Fax. 595563
E-mail: ssa@eureka.lk

Annual subscriptions:

Sri Lanka	Rs.	300
By Air mail:		
South Asia/Middle East	US \$	28
S.E. Asia/Far East	US \$	28
Europe/Africa	US \$	30
Americas/Pacific countries	US \$	40

as a victim of the aggressive politics of the minorities as well as the disinterest of the state in the protection of the majority's vital interests. The minorities, meanwhile, perceive the state and its agencies, particularly the police and the bureaucracy, as communalist and racially partisan. The police is often identified as having aided and abetted majoritarian violence against the minorities. This context places a heavy burden on the regime in power to design a cautiously designed strategy to manage and mediate in conflicting ethnic approaches to moments and events of tension. The police culpability in letting conditions deteriorate in moments of inter-communal tension is indeed legendary in South Asia. What is needed in Sri Lanka are political mechanisms that can effectively intervene in moments like Mawanella and Maradana. One idea would be the setting up of an Ethnic Relations Commission, comprising of political leaders of all parties in parliament. Such a Commission, comprising representatives of all political

as well as ethnic parties, can also defuse situations where ethnic parties tend to obtain momentary political advantage from potentially volatile situations of inter-community tension.

Conflict prevention is as important as conflict management in maintaining peaceful ethnic relations. A measure that the government might take in this direction is the setting up of a mechanism to monitor events that have a bearing on inter-community relations. Regular monitoring will certainly enable the government to identify potential flashpoints and take appropriate measures to prevent crisis situations from developing. It needs to be said in this context that in many provincial towns, extreme Sinhalese political groups have been organizing the Sinhalese trading community against Tamil and Muslim trading communities. Appeals to Sinhalese consumers to boycott Tamil and Muslim shops have also been a part of this mobilization. In the face of threats from Sinhalese nationalist groups, the minority trading communities have also reacted at times in an organized manner and on the assumption that violence should be met with violence. In the Mawanella riots, both Sinhalese and Muslim merchants appeared to have acted in an organized manner, unleashing their own gangs. In a way, every town where majority and minority trading communities do business, the old forms of inter-communal peace appear to have disappeared. Communalist political cadres, through indoctrination and organization, have sowed the seeds of communalism among traders, often turning them into 'riot activists.' This tendency needs to be arrested while new forms of inter-ethnic solidarity and interaction among trading groups of different communities are being introduced. This is where a monitoring committee can productively take creative initiatives to promote dialogue and communication among traders and the town dwellers.

The question of hate speech has also surfaced in the events that followed the Mawanella incidents. It is very clear that hate speech not only demonize rival ethnic communities, but also creates an

atmosphere for violent action through instigation and provocation. Demagogic politicians as well as religio-political cadres have been resorting to hate speech, with the clear intent of provoking ethnically motivated violence. It is also a telling comment on the media standards in Sri Lanka that the print as well as electronic media has been providing forum for Sinhalese majoritarian hate speech against the minorities. It is now very clear that guidelines for the media to refrain from providing space for hate speech need to be worked out by an appropriate state agency.

The government's inaction to bring to justice perpetrators of communal violence has been one of the most distressing political tendencies in Sri Lanka in recent years. Those who are responsible for the massive anti-Tamil riots of July 1983 have never been found or punished. The government took months to appoint an investigative body to inquire into last year's massacre of Tamil inmates in the Bindunuwewa rehabilitation camp. The Mawanella incident may also go uninvestigated, particularly because of the alleged involvement in it of a powerful local politician of the ruling party. The government should realize that when perpetrators of communal violence go unidentified and unpunished, that impunity constitutes a serious lapse in the duty of the state to protect the minorities. The state has a duty to ensure that the conditions are created for minority protection from the physical violence of the groups of the majority community. If the state fails in this duty, the signs are that militant majoritarian groups are likely to use violence, terror and intimidation against minority communities. As patterns of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka as well as other South Asian countries clearly indicate, traders of minority communities can become prime targets of majoritarian ethnic hatred while the minority groups are also more likely to retaliate violence with violence. Mawanella incidents are a clear pointer to this possible trajectory of Sri Lanka's ethnic violence in the years to come.

P