Not My Kind of Hero: Prof. Jayadeva Uyangoda's Speech at the Launch of Grandfather's Letters by C. Anjalendran

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Text of the Speech on the release of the book, Grandfather's Letters by C. Anjalendran, at Barefoot Gallery, July 12, 2016.

This delightful little book is a selection of letters written by Mr. C. Suntharalingam to his grandchildren. C. Anjalendran, a grandson, has put them together, with a brief 'Introduction." Perera and Hussein Publishing House has published these letters with a highly professional layout and design.

Grandfather's Letters running into a little over two hundred pages, is simply a fascinating collection of a host of autobiographical letters written by a Sri Lankan politician who lived through most of the last century. C. Suntharalingam's political career spans the last two decades of Sri Lanka's British colonial rule and the first three decades of the country's post-colonial, post-independence change.

A sceptical, yet avid, reader of biographies and autobiographies, particularly of those who think about themselves as makers of history, I too found this book quite fascinating. I have a somewhat academic interest in the ways of thinking, behaviour and forms of interaction among the elites and ruling classes. One major reason for this fascination is perhaps that I am of peasant origins, and it is, in a psycho-analytical sense, a desire to know the social or the class 'other.' Indeed, one aspect of this book which I found exhilaratingly appealing to me is the sketch of how a young peasant boy – no disrespect intended -- from the village of Urumpirai in Jaffna eventually became absorbed into the Sinhalese ruling class and finally led a lone rebellion in order to carve out his own personal corner in the country's political history.

The letters included in this volume are indeed, as the invitation to this event tells us correctly, politically motivated ones. Mr. Suntharalingam has written them during the 1950s. Having semi-retired from an astonishingly active career in politics, he looks back at his life and politics with a sense of some detachment as well as intense attachment. He describes events, explains his role in key and crucial moments in politics, and pronounces his own assessments and judgments of men and matters, with a sense of authority and at times studied disdain that can be expected from a patriarch in retirement.

Suntharalingam's inclusion as a member of the ruling elite was a process facilitated by the opening up of opportunities for upward social mobility, during the mature phase of Sri Lanka's colonial social change. This was a process that disregarded ethnic identity. English medium education in science, law and medicine, coupled with individual brilliance, was a prime factor leading to the new class formation in Jaffna. The story of the first half of C. Suntharalingam's life, as depicted in these letters, is paradigmatic of this larger historical narrative.

These letters, written by Mr. C. Suntharalingam to his grandchildren, are partly autobiographical. They are also partly social and political commentary. The letters offer a carefully constructed self-portrait of the patriarch: a man possessing a brilliant academic mind, bureaucrat and politician with a sharp sense of judgment and tact, and a political loner who considered himself to be far superior to his peers, masters and contemporaries. With such an unmitigated sense of self-worth, and unconcealed contempt for one's competitors, as repeatedly revealed in these letters, one has to be a loner, none else. Not surprisingly, Suntharalingam has fought almost all his political battles alone. Some of them, such as the campaign to block the depressed caste communities from entering the Mavaddipuram Kovil, were not really heroic battles. Mathematician and lawyer, Suntharalingam obviously did not care much about the larger meanings of some of his actions of going against the grain of history as well as social justice.

There are three themes, or narrative lines, that run through these letters. The first is the life and times of a young Tamil boy from Jaffna's rural middle class in the early twentieth century. Amidst his mother's anxieties, he had migrated to Colombo and later to England, for education. This was the time when Sri Lanka's colonial modernity had begun to show its concrete results, as was to be later shown in Basil Wright's iconic documentary film– The Song of Ceylon. The railway, road and telecommunication networks, rapid movement of people from one corner of the island to others, ports and ships that transported commodities and people to England amidst the threat of German submarines. Suntharalingam's letters add up to the list -- English-medium boarding schools, school curriculum for boys with mathematics and British as well as European history, the mixing of bright boys from different ethnic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds as more or less equals in the class room, and finally, the opening up of the space for individual brilliance and a deep sense of individualism among colonial citizens. Suntharalingam was the individualist par excellence, the Kantian modern autonomous man, as revealed literally in every line of these letters. If he did not enter politics, he could have developed his persona into a renaissance-type intellectual all rounder – mathematician, lawyer, political thinker, historian, and philosopher.

The second theme is his bureaucratic and political career, which can be described as brilliant, eventful, combative and colourful. His nickname was 'Controversial.' It could even have been 'combative' or 'colourful.' Suntharalingam describes with great openness and candour his close working association during the 1930s and 1940s with major figures of the emerging Sinhalese ruling class – D. S. Senanayake Oliver Goonetilleke, S, W. R. D. Bandaranaike, and John Kotelawala. While reading his account, one cannot resist the observation that C. Suntharalingam considered himself to be a leading member of the emerging Sinhalese ruling class. As his account also suggests, many educated and professional Tamils would have aspired to be in the Sinhalese ruling class as equals to their Sinhalese counterparts. Perhaps, it was the denial of this equality of status within the emerging ruling class, and being treated as mere servants, that ignited the sparks of modern Tamil nationhood in Sri Lanka, first among members of the professional elite. It was interestingly not a reaction to British colonial masters; rather, it was resistance against a bunch of class comrades who were getting ready to turn themselves into new masters. It was no accident that Suntharalingam was the first among professional Tamil politicians to imagine a separate statehood for a separate Tamil nation. His accounts of highly personal power struggles with D. S. Senanayake, Bandaranaike, Oliver Goonetilleke and John Kotelawala are replete with anecdotes that provide rare insights into how Tamil nationalism emerged as an elitist project, a product of inter-elite competition.

The third theme is Sri Lanka's political change after independence. Suntharalingam was a Minister and MP during most of the post-independence years. In this process too, he did not seem to be a team player associated with any political bloc as such, but a single guerilla fighter. To be a lone guerilla fighter in the game of

parliamentary political competition, is obviously a considered decision on his part. As his self-portrait painted in these letters suggests, he was obviously a man of strict principles and rigid convictions. His temperament was such that he was not ready to sacrifice his personal convictions in order to be a member of a political team called a political party. He remained an 'independent', with no party affiliations to honour, or party discipline to adhere to. Vijayananda Dahanayake from Galle perhaps came close to C. Suntharalingam in thoroughly enjoying, and marking a unique name for himself through the political life of a lone guerilla. Suntharalaingam's narrative of his interventions and actions during the 1958 communal riots is much about his own political character and personality as about those tragic events. He wanted, and managed, to do things by himself in managing the crisis in Vavuniya. He seems to have relied more on his personal contacts with the Governor General. Prime Minister, senior government officials and the local citizens than party or civil society networks, in bringing under control a potentially explosive situation of communal disturbances in his electorate.

Personal Relations

One of the things that continued to amaze me is the kind of personal relations that members of the ruing elite seems to have had. This has been a small group of men who had known each other in school, and in the university. They were members of the same debating society. They also nursed their own personal prejudices and grudges grown out of their juvenile fights or at a debating competition in school. They had no hesitation to use opportunities in their professional and political careers later to settle those old personal scores. Parliament was the forum for many of those verbal battles that were interspersed with the school boyish determination to settle old cores. But in times of trouble, they would help each other, yet, letting the other know that the old bitterness is not forgotten or forgiven. Anticipating the imminent possibility of house-arrest in 1958, Suntharalingam could even send his daughter to see the Governor General, Oliver Goonetilleke, to deliver a personal message. On other occasions, he could telephone the Governor General and address him by his first name, even though the tone of 'hello' from the other side betrayed some hesitation. (p. 149).

I suppose this is the same kind of first-name-calling relationship that other Sinhalese and Tamil leaders – Dudley Senanayake, J. R. Jayewardene, Lalith Athualthmudali, Gamini Dissanayake, S. J. V. Chelvanayakam, G. G. Ponnambalam, M. Tiruchelvam, A. Amirthalingam, P. Sivasittamparam – also probably had. Yet, the puzzling question is why and how that relationship broke down in political terms? There are vague hints of an explanation implicit in these grandfather's letters. There has been no Sinhalese and Tamil ruling class integration in any enduring sense. Kumari Jayawardena has explained this paradox in terms of development of colonial capitalism and class formation in Sri Lanka. She attributes it to the specific underdeveloped, or 'backward', character of this particular social class. From the point of view of the first generation of the Sinhalese elite, it was a master-servant relationship that was destined to break up sooner or later. This is what Suntharalingam's letters disclose to the social historian.

C. Suntharaligam was an unusual politician. His major political positions were right-wing, ethno-nationalist, and embarrassingly reactionary. He opposed, along with the fellow members of the pre-independence indigenous elite, the introduction of universal suffrage and expansion of modern democracy. Many of his reactionary traits were also ones shared by most of his Sinhalese counterparts. Suntharalingam opposed the right of so-called lower caste Tamil citizen's entry to Hindu temples, managed by the upper caste Hindus, his own class and caste brothers. He even mobilized the latter in open defiance of the social disabilities act, one of the few progressive social legislations enacted by Sri Lanka's post-independence parliament. His Sinhalese counterparts were a little smarter, and they avoided expressing openly their admiration of caste hierarchies. Suntharalingam was a Tamil nationalist and his nationalism was a racist

variant. But his racism was not as rabid as that of K. M. P. Rajaratna or the post-1983 Sinhala chinthanites. He had no patience either to tolerate any moderate version of Tamil nationalism. Marked by all these embellishments, C. Suntharalingam was a major figure in Sri Lanka's twentieth century politics. His letters to his grand children are source material for valuable information and insights.

Suntharalingam is not my type of a hero, since I am a Leftist and a socialist. Yet, I immensely enjoyed reading his letters and learned much from them. The political motives behind D. S. Senanayake's keenness to include ethnic minority MPS in the first post-independence cabinet, the move to form a party and a government of independent MPs soon after the 1947 parliamentary election, offering Suntharalingam the post of PM, are some of the details of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's power struggle within the UNP leading to his break away in 1952 are truly captivating. His account of the 1958 ethnic riots is detailed and comprehensive. For students of the origin and spread of ethnic riots, the letters covering the period of 1958 are immeasurably valuable.

I have no hesitation whatsoever in recommending this book to all of you, to the interested reader and the scholar alike. Perera and Hussein Publishing House has done a commendable job in making these letters available in a nicely designed and reader-friendly slim volume. I sincerely hope that each of you after buying a copy of this book will begin your first letter to your grandchild, son, daughter or any young descendent tonight itself. It will help recover and re-launch the lost art of autobiographical letter writing.

(12th July 2016)