

A VOICE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

(A TRIBUTE TO THE LATE ADRIAN WIJEMANNE)

Neville Jayaweera

Unlike the more famous voice that cried in the wilderness some two thousand years ago, Adrian Wijemanne did not literally have his head served on a platter, but was regularly threatened with reprisals no less gruesome. Neither did he ever have to live on a diet of locusts and honey, but was constantly promised humble pie unless he stopped writing and lecturing on the ethnic conflict. His detractors not only ridiculed and abused him, but also directed at him, hate mail, death threats and promises of bodily harm if he ever set foot in his native Sri Lanka. Even though for the past 5 years he was ravaged by cancer and was often in excruciating pain, hardly anyone, that is, besides his immediate family his devoted wife Chitra, daughter Shevanthi, and son-in-law Dr Bruce Roser, and occasionally a few other close friends, and myself, cared to look him up or call him. The only reason for banishing Wijemanne to the wilderness was that he had the audacity and the moral courage, unequivocally, volubly and globally, to challenge the extreme rightist Sinhala orthodoxy on the Sinhala-Tamil conflict.

Wijemanne, a distinguished product of Royal College Colombo, passed into the then CCS in 1947 and went on to hold several important positions in the Lands and Irrigation Ministry. However, though a scion of a top drawer Sinhala family from Kalutara, unable to adapt himself to the emerging culture of political interference, indiscipline and ethnic discrimination, during Mrs Bandaranaike's first government in the early 1960s, (he took early retirement). After a short stint in the private sector in Colombo, he joined the World Council of Churches, as the head of its Development Bank in Geneva (moving later to Amsterdam) in which role he served till his retirement in the early 1990s. Upon retirement, he and his wife Chitra settled down in England, to be close to their daughter Shevanthi.

In 2001 Wijemanne was first diagnosed with a cancer of the spine but even though the illness took hold rapidly and he was often in great pain, he never spoke about his condition, unless asked. I saw him last as he lay dying in hospital, a few days before he passed away, but even then, though in unutterable pain, he was lamenting not his illness but the

folly of SL leaders in failing even belatedly to face up to the reality of the crisis facing the country. Two days after I saw him he went into a coma and within another two days, on the 22nd of July, passed away. He was 81.

Handling dissent

Wijemanne and I had not only been colleagues in SL (he was my senior in the Service by seven years) but after we both took early retirement, we went on to be colleagues in the international ecumenical service as well, he working from Geneva and I from London. However it was only after we both finally retired in the mid 1990s that we got to talking on the telephone almost daily, sharing our respective views, mostly on issues relating to the ethnic conflict, but often discussing international problems and spiritual and religious themes as well. Very often we disagreed, and disagreed vehemently too, but it was the measure of his stature as an intellectual that Wijemanne could not only listen to those who held contrary views but could also handle dissent with total composure, without becoming personal or vituperative, however animated the discussion or sharp the discord. I thought that this inner coherence and dignity, more than anything he wrote, set Wijemanne apart as an intellectual. Equally, Wijemanne was endowed with a rare sense of humour and a capacity for infectious laughter, with which he fended off with a total insouciance, the vituperation that detractors hurled at him regularly.

Motivation

During the period 1990 to 2001, Wijemanne not only wrote copiously but also lectured widely, in the USA, in Canada and in Europe. Although he copied all of his writings to the principal broadsheets in SL, hardly any local paper published them. However, several global websites carried them regularly and the Internet multiplied them hundreds of thousands of times over. I recall that in the nineties, along with the SL journal Pravada, Wijemanne writings were standard reading for diplomats manning South Asian desks in the Foreign Offices of European capitals. I also recall that at least on one occasion in the nineties, the

UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva gave him a hearing in his personal capacity, which was an unprecedented gesture for a UN body.

However, regardless of all this publicity and international exposure, Wijemanne remained transparently modest and devoid of ego, neither talking about himself nor ever deliberately seeking public profile or visibility. He was modest not only in demeanour but also lived modestly with his wife Chitra in a twin bedroom suburban apartment, never accepting payment either for lecturing or for writing and having only his pension and savings for an income.

Former friends and even relatives, often wondered what motivated Wijemanne to espouse the Tamil cause in the manner he did, exposing himself to such wanton condemnation. Far from deriving any material or visible benefits, he and his family paid a mighty price for his self sacrificial commitment, in terms of the stress they were constantly subjected to, and their eviction from the mainstream Sinhala community, both in SL and in the UK.

I believe that what motivated Wijemanne was a total dedication to justice and righteousness as he saw it, untainted by self or ambition, and stemming from his deep Christian roots. Espousing the cause of the Tamil people was not for him a foreign funded. He did it because he believed that it was the right thing to do, whatever the cost, and expediency and opportunism never stained his endeavours. He simply loathed injustice and oppression per se, by whomsoever perpetrated, not only in SL, but wherever it manifested in the world, and he spoke up as unequivocally on the side of the Bosnians, the Palestinians and the Chechnyan rebels as well.

A contradiction

However, heroic though he was, Wijemanne stance on the LTTE was fraught with a contradiction, which he and I have debated lengthily, though without resolution. The contradiction was simply this. How can one condemn Sinhala oppression of the Tamil people on one hand and yet not condemn the oppression of the Tamil people by the LTTE itself? How can one condemn state terror and turn a blind eye to LTTE terror?

Wijemanne sought to resolve this contradiction by claiming that the LTTE recourse to repression and terror was episodic

and tactically inevitable, as it had been with every liberation struggle throughout history, whether class based or nationalistic. He believed that when Eelam is finally achieved and Tamil society secured and stabilised, the need to resort to repression and terror will disappear and the culture of violence wither away. In support of his contention Wijemanne would cite the liberation struggles in Kenya, Algeria, Cyprus and Ireland.

Those who seek to justify the use of terror and repression as tactical tools often adduce this argument. However, as I used to point out to Wijemanne repeatedly, any society which claims to be civilised must order its affairs within a framework of certain absolute values, and the abrogation of democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, and the systematic recourse to terror, whether by state or non-state actors, even tactically, is never acceptable. On the other hand, it is true that the UN system has conceded to states the right to derogate human rights and the rule of law, for coping with specific emergencies, under certain defined conditions and subject to strict monitoring by international agencies, but not as an alternative to democratically resolving long simmering national conflicts.

Tamil nationhood

Wijemanne perspective on the ethnic conflict flowed from the premise that the claim of the SL Tamils to nationhood (not to be confused for statehood) is irrefutable. He held that by internationally accepted criteria, insofar as the Tamils of Sri Lanka had been in continuous occupation of a clearly defined territory for more than 1500 years, and are heirs to a distinctive language, and a distinctive religion and could claim to belong to the sub-continent's oldest culture, and most of all, are sustained by a vibrant sense of ethnic identity, they were already a nation, whether or not the Sinhalayo and the rest of the world recognised it. What was in dispute was whether that nation, so conceived, could be integrated within a single Sri Lankan state, or whether it should, or could, set itself up as a separate state.

He also believed that it was primarily in the interest of the Sinhalayo to release the Dhamilo from the majoritarian stranglehold they exercised over them, so that both nations, the Sinhala and the Dhamila, may prosper in a symbiotic and synergistic relationship within a single united Sri Lankan state, rather than waste their respective resources in a self-destructive civil war.

Terror and terrorism

Wijemanne held very strong views on the subject of terror and terrorism. While condemning terror, he also refused to draw a distinction between state terror and non-state terror. Terror is terror by whomsoever inflicted and he held that state terror was in fact more reprehensible because it had unlimited access to sophisticated technology and could easily cloak evil in the vestments of legality and legitimacy. He often cited the USA, the UK, France and the Soviet Union throughout their histories, and Germany and Japan during WW2, as classic perpetrators of state terror and claimed that more often than not, it is the state that casts the first stone and that non-state terror is invariably a last resort response by an underclass, driven to extreme frustration by the intransigence of the state.

Wijemanne was convinced that whether it takes another five decades or more, unless the Sinhala polity remedies the conditions that first generated Tamil militancy and LTTE terror, the blood letting will continue until the Tamil people finally emerge as a separate state or at least take their place as equal partners within a confederation. Therefore he urged that it was equally in the interests of both the groups to accelerate that outcome fast, through dialogue and negotiation. However, he also believed that such an outcome is not likely without direct foreign intervention and without a Dayton Accord type formula being first put in place. In

the absence of such a *deus ex machina* he envisaged an endless haemorrhaging of both groups and their total debilitation.

Current trends

I believe that some of Wijemanne's views, as expressed in his writings of the early to mid nineties, especially concerning LTTE's policy on violence and terror, were flawed. But then, so has every conceivable view on the ethnic conflict, there being no fully consistent position ever possible, which can satisfy equally the aspirations of all parties, while simultaneously meeting the demands of liberal values.

Wijemanne's contribution to the debate is that he has, more than any Sinhala commentator or intellectual I know of, exposed with a relentless clarity and power, with total commitment, and on a global canvas, and furthermore, without material support from any quarter either, the folly of the main line Sinhala orthodoxy, and with equal cogency, argued the case for the Tamils. Judging by the current trends, the Wijemanne view that unless Tamil grievances are rapidly remedied through negotiations, helam, or at least a confederation, is inevitable, may not be so delusional as some may think. Adrian Wijemanne may not have had his head served on a platter, but he may yet prove to have been the prophet of his generation. ■

SENAKE BIBILE'S LIFE AND WORK

Carlo Fonseka

Senake William Bibile was born to an aristocratic family of Uva-Wellasa on the 13th of February 1920. He was the eldest of the six children of Sylvia Augusta Jayawardane (daughter of Mudaliyar Harry Jayawardane of Kataluwa, Galle) and Charles William Bibile, the much-loved *Rata Mohorumpu* of Bibile at that time. A brilliant, scholarship-winning student and award-winning sportsman, he could also act, sing and dance. He was indeed an extra-ordinarily talented all-rounder. He was educated at Trinity College Kandy (1928 – 1939); the Colombo Medical School (1940 – 1945); and the University of Edinburgh (1949 – 1952). At the Colombo Medical School, he graduated MBBS

in 1945, having passed all the professional examinations in the First Class and winning the most prestigious gold medals on offer: the Dharmjishaw Dadabhoy Gold Medal for Medicine and the Rockwood Gold Medal for Surgery. In due course, he distinguished himself as an academic pharmacologist, a world-class medical scientist, a charismatic university professor, a perceptive medical educationist, and a socialist visionary, deeply involved in humankind.

Of all the doctors Sri Lanka has ever produced, Professor Senake Bibile must be reckoned the one whose life's work directly benefits to the greatest degree patients who need

