# *Mē Kauda? Monawada Karanne?* The Potential Futures of an "Alternative World" and the Political Legacy of Richard de Zoysa

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*Mē Kauda? Monawada Karanne?* ('Who is he? What is he doing?') was the title of a play, allegedly, that got Richard de Zoysa killed (Wijesinha 2000: 12; Parliament 1990, February 20: 2327).

That year, many young people died. For example, Janaka Seneviratne and Nishantha Sampath Ediriwickrama were among the suspects in the assassination attempt of Minister Ranjan Wijeratne who had been abducted from their homes and disappeared. The *Hansard* of 7 March 1990, reports that D. M. S. B. Dissanayake asked about their whereabouts in Parliament:

> The father of one of these students, Mr. J. D.A. Senevirathna, met me and requested me to look into this. Therefore, I would like to ask the Hon. State Minister if these three are alive, if so, where they are held, and whether their parents can be permitted to see them. (Parliament 1990, March 7: 348-9)

In an earlier debate about the killing of de Zoysa, Anura Bandaranaike states,

> The killing of Mr. Richard Zoysa [sic] has pricked the conscience of the middle class of this country. You can kill a hundred de Zoysas in Hambantota, as hundreds have been killed … but this single individual epitomises the somewhat anesthetised conscience of Colombo's middle class. (Parliament 1990, February 22: 2634)

To remember Richard is to remember what was forgotten, what was seen as what must be forgotten. Richard de Zoysa was one among many killed at the time, and to talk of him, is to talk of all of them, killed for the various big and small political sins they had committed … or none at all.

There was little doubt that de Zoysa had been abducted and killed by the state security forces; his mother identified Senior Superintendent of Police Ronnie Gunasinghe as the abductor of her son (Heaton-Armstrong 1991: 10-11). Gamini Fonseka, actor turned politician acted as Saviman Kabalana, the industrial magnate whose son, Malin the leftist trade union organiser played by de Zoysa in *Yuganthaya,* the cinematic adaptation of the novel by the same name. At the time of the latter's death, Fonseka was the deputy speaker of the parliament, and he allegedly assured de Zoysa's mother that he was safe (Heaton-Armstrong 1991: 9). De Zoysa's body carried marks of torture, characteristic of victims of the state military and paramilitaries, at the time. Yet, when parliament took up a debate about his death, another story appeared. It was alleged that his death was caused by a personal vendetta (Parliament 1991, February 7: 951-7). He was accused of having been in the wrong company and framed as a decadent bourgeois radical who had met his end in the debauchery of his life. The political, as it often does, slipped into the sexual, just like that. This sexualised narrative about his death never died, and it is often referred to directly or indirectly, particularly in English novels such as Shehan Karunatilaka's *Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* and Shyam Selvaduarai's *Hungry Ghosts*. This is the story that is likely to stick. Nevertheless, in this short intervention, I explore his writing, to examine what ideas of his are worth returning to today; to remember Richard for his ideas, for the future he imagined as a *could have been*.

First, memories. After Richard de Zoysa was killed, the *Yukthiya* newspaper carried a picture of him with a translation of Otto Rene Castillo's poem "Apolitical Intellectuals" and the title read, "*Richardge mēsaya matha mesē liyawee thibuni*" ('On Richard's table, it was written thus'). At fifteen, I tried to imagine him, reading Castillo or Neruda, his portrayals of Malin and Rinsley

etched on my mind, sad for another life that had been lost. It was my first encounter with Castillo's work, and I had just started reading Neruda.

The literature, the iconography, and the passion surrounding his death, captured in the campaign "Freedom from Fear"—in which Richard had a sideward serious glance, handsome in his beard and spectacles, and Rajani Thiranagama smiled a radiant smile from black-on-white printed T-shirts—became an essential part of my own political imagination both then and now. Richard and Rajani were mobilised as symbols of truth and freedom by that campaign, and it has taken many years of undoing and disentangling for me to be able to see them as human and fallible. The image has always been larger than life.

But it is not this romanticised Richard that we meet in his writing. I will begin with his poetry and get to his prose, to identify key strands that bear political significance.

**Poems as social and political observation**

De Zoysa's poetry is rampant with cynical criticism of the Anglophone Colombo elite. He noted their callous indifference to the violence that rocked the country, noting their cultural crudity and complicity with the ruling regime that was causing widespread poverty and engineering ethnic divisions to its political advantage. In "Talking of Michelangelo" (2000) he writes,

> Preside beringed and Kaftan clad
> At coffee mornings, soirees, teas,
> Expound the need for nuclear freeze
> Pop ice in drinks, shake head, look sad
> About the teeming underfed. (105)

Often, his class criticism was not expressed in the abstract, but in the concrete tools used to perpetuate its rule over the country through education and ideology. For example, he portrays the ravages of education when he compares the educated to a butterfly pinned down "on cardboard behind glass/ Specimen of the educated class" ("Lepidoptera" in 2000: 77). His best political poems take aim at the United National Party (UNP) rule, represented generally using various animal allegories. For example, in "Gajagavannama", he uses the trope of the elephant as a double-faced behemoth, who while courting the lazy life of rustic kings, suddenly turns violent, striking terror on the city:

> The city froze. Then birds sprang to the air,
> and men to trees. Vehicles clambered walls.
> all order vanished, as the blind grey surge
> swept down the arcades, and the trumpet calls
> drowned klaxons, sirens, bells, horns, engines – swamped
> the roaring of the bloodstream of Colombo.
> Quite suddenly it ended. Having made
> his point, the pachyderm returned to jumbo
>
> and plodded meekly home. The city now
> knows behemoths, aroused, will rule by riot. (2000: 70)

This poem, written a few months before the 1983 riots, is prophetic of how the UNP would continue to rule the country during that decade.

What is perhaps curious, then, is also to note that at the time, at least according to Rajiva Wijesinha, Richard de Zoysa's closest political affiliate was Lalith Athulathmudali. Wijesinha contends that until about 1987, de Zoysa remained close to Lalith Athulathmudali (Wijesinha 2000: 49-50). Those who read de Zoysa's poems critical of the UNP often forget that he is criticising a party that he had long-standing family ties with, and which he knew intimately. In parliament, several members commented on his proximity and services to the government. Most notably, Minister Ranjan Wijeratne himself states,

> But I must state that Mr. Richard de Soysa [sic] was the person who came forward to give a narration on the Gam Udawa, and we are very concerned ourselves that this person has been abducted and done to death. The investigation is going on. (Parliament 1990, February 20: 2338)

It is clear, then, from this and other comments made during the parliamentary debates regarding the abduction and murder of Richard de Zoysa that he was seen as being close to the government, whether strategically or not.

This is particularly pertinent as the producer of the play *Mē Kauda? Monawada Karanne?* Lakshman Perera was a UNP member of the Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia Municipal Council (Parliament 1990 February 20: 2327). The play, supposedly mocking President Premadasa seems to have originated from sources within the UNP rather than outside it, and certainly not the JVP of the time. What is deeply ironic is the fact that de Zoysa, of all people, knew that the UNP did not tolerate satire: "Mock not the elephant. You will surely die" he wrote in an earlier version of the "Gajagavannama". In another earlier poem titled "Colombo 1981" he addresses Tarzie Vittachi by name and complains that satire has been "ditched" along with the "Racecourse, Queen, and Punkah":

> … now, throughout the land
> where Laughter and Lampoon reigned, we meekly
> Bow to the Pomp-and-Circumstantial, grand
> Progress of that great Roadshow, politics. (2000: 103)

Thus, de Zoysa's poetry presents us with an image of a young man, critical of the political world and the class he belonged to, yearning for satire that bites and shakes people out of complacency.

De Zoysa's political approach to culture was influenced by his knowledge of classical English literature and theatre, and he is perhaps best remembered by the literary circles he frequented for his haunting performances. Beyond this literary talent also lay a mind that understood the political economy of culture, the historical construction of Sinhala-Buddhist culture infused with a hefty dose of Victorian morality, and the pitfalls of ethnicised understandings of a single national culture. In the rest of this essay, I explore this aspect of Richard de Zoysa's work.

**Critic of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and liberal multiculturalism**

In 1990, *Mawatha*, a Sinhalese language periodical known as a venue for progressive and leftist dialogues, published three essays in its July-September issue that focused on the nationalist discourse known as "*Jāthika Chinthanaya*" (National Consciousness): The Doric de Souza Memorial Lecture delivered by Regi Siriwardena in January of that year; "A Manifesto for an Alternative World" by Richard de Zoysa; an essay by Serena Tennakoon, "National Identity as a Historical Construction". De Zoysa in his essay, the last written by him before he was abducted and killed, published in *The Island* on 11 February 1990, directly engaged with *Jāthika Chinthanaya*. Tennakoon's essay is a brilliant analysis of the state's appropriation of Sinhalese rituals as an instrument for constructing an ethnocratic ideology of a Sri Lankan identity.

It is clear that in 1990, the debate about the left's possible futures were open to debate, and that de Zoysa was among the many voices that wished to challenge the assumptions of *Jāthika Chinthanaya*. In this respect, "A Manifesto for an Alternative World" is quite clear. What is equally interesting is de Zoysa's position on neoliberalism and its cultural ethos, and his rejection of a simple affiliation with a cultural cosmopolitanism that failed to consider the economic and political realities of a country ravaged by violence and deprivation through war and neoliberalisation.

Regi Siriwardena's Doric de Souza Memorial Lecture was titled, "The Choice Before the Intelligentsia: Jathika Chinthanaya or Multi-culturalism". Siriwardena frames *Jāthika Chinthanaya* and multiculturalism as opposite ideological positions available to intellectuals of the time, a binary that, as we shall see, de Zoysa rejected with much foresight. Siriwardena believes that the bilingual intellectual class could "bridge the gap between the reality and the awareness that Sri Lanka is a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic society".

Reclaiming *thuppahi* as a code word for plural cultural identities, Siriwardena (1990) stated in his essay:

> I would like to redeem the word. As I have already argued, what we need today is tolerance, openness, pluralism — towards the cultural traditions of the various ethnic groups in our society as well as towards international cultures. If that is so, the more "thuppahi" we are in my sense of the word, the better. (10)

In response, Gunadasa Amarasekara (1990) defined *Jāthika Chinthanaya* in *The Island* the following Sunday as follows: "a culture based national ethos, an all-pervading national psyche peculiar to each nation that one can understand these changes — the revival of the national identities, languages and religions in a meaningful manner" (6). It is a transcendent ethos, shared by all nationalities, but one that is also Sinhala Buddhist. In this essay, Amarasekara builds a lineage between the Sinhalese intelligentsia of the present, Martin Wickramasinghe and Anagarika Dharmapala, and no doubt himself and Nalin de Silva.

Richard de Zoysa (1990) responded, taking on several strands of discussion that had dominated the debate. He begins with the situation in Eastern Europe, a popular topic at the time. Both Siriwardena and Amarasekara touch on it, but it is to Amarasekara that de Zoysa responds, clearly asking if the ethnic tensions unfolding within Soviet Russia, as well as the Eastern European bloc, are not the result of "precisely the kind of politics that his Jathika Chinthanaya implies?" De Zoysa then goes on to point to the danger of "liberal thinkers" such as Amarasekara propounding this "nobly-meant but woolly-minded theory", in a society in which "these are liable to be picked up by politicians—especially in a society as bankrupt of ideas as ours". He does not argue with Amarasekara in the abstract, but in the concrete political context in which the idea is being absorbed by youth groups on the ground, particularly the JVP and the "Jathika Chinthanaya boys led by Nalin de Silva".

What we see in this article is a keen mind, finely attuned to politics, and a deep sense of responsibility he felt the intelligentsia owed to the country. He then goes on to discuss the case of India, before returning to Sri Lanka:

> And at least India and the Soviet Union had a Nehru and a Lenin … all we ever had, by contrast, was the real politik of the Senanayakes, Bandaranaikes, and master of the game, Jayawardene … Dr. Amarasekera's 'way of thinking … that is neither an 'ism' nor a new political ideology' has only provided a philosophical underpinning for racism of the worst kind.

Sometimes, it is easy to forget that de Zoysa was still writing in 1990, without having seen the destructive impact of *Jāthika Chinthanaya* on Sri Lankan politics during the years to come. His writing style stings, his prose breathing anger as he describes the political lineage of a theory he thought will be absolutely dangerous:

> … to find anything in common between that great rationalist [Martin Wickramasinghe] and that great humbug Anagarika Dharmapala really takes a lot of doing. All the Anagarika did was to graft Victorian middle-class morality, with its strong puritan strain, onto bourgeois Buddhism. Culturally, the results were appalling – prudery where it did not exist, charity of the most patronising kind, and abominations like the 'Bakthi gee Karaththay and 'Vesak card'. If anybody saw the world through "borrowed glasses " of his colonial masters, it was the Anagarika. He gave the rural petit bourgeois a sense of cultural arrogance; Bandaranaike gave some of them an economic mobility; neither imbued them with any sense of concern for the rungs of society below them or for those from their own class who they would leave behind in there race to emulate first their white and then their brown masters; neither educated them in the notion that they were not the sole inhabitants of this island and that myths and past glories are not a strong enough basis for coping with rival aspirations of 30 percent-strong minorities. The old left and the JVP have traded accusations of being basically petit bourgeois and it is perfectly true that neither the dogma of the one nor the revolutionary fervour of the other proved sufficient to dent this smug, self-assured mentality enough to gather real mass support. (de Zoysa, 1990)

These powerful words, radical even thirty-five years after his death, shows de Zoysa's fervent disillusionment with a political tradition that had left few options for those who truly sought a more just and equitable Sri Lanka.

In the three decades after his death, we have witnessed how the old and the new left, the moderate and the extreme left in the Sinhalese-dominated South were all generally absorbed into the same puritanical strand of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism, destroying any hope of the emergence of political forces that could represent the political aspirations of minorities, peddling over and over a false, transcendental "national" cultural ethos, framed as being the panacea to the real political demands for minority rights in the country.

De Zoysa's take on the "Culture" debate is unusually acute. He first refutes the idea that the "hydraulic" agricultural system and the influence of Buddhism produced a transcendental culture unique to the nation. While producing a homogeneous culture, he argues, its way of life is not too different from any agricultural, hydraulic society, particularly those found in South and South-East Asia influenced by Buddhism. Rather controversially, he argues that

> There are cultural similarities among all of them, because their economic life is similar. The specific elements that make up a culture – language and dress, rites and rituals – can differ in their physical details. But the compound of all those creates a way of life, and that compound owes its nature to the kind of economic activity the community indulges in. It is this that could eventually create a "transcendent culture", if such a thing is possible.

The materialist tone of this understanding of national culture is clear immediately. De Zoysa dismisses a cultural abstraction based on religion that ostensibly typifies the national culture and instead argues that the material organisation of the agrarian economy produces what can be seen as "transcendent" in such cultures. This is a sharp Marxist critique of *Jāthika Chinthanaya* that nevertheless does not bask in theoretical or philosophical rigmaroles. Instead, he focuses on the political economy of the idea of a transcendent culture, which leads him to critique *Jāthika Chinthanaya* in no uncertain terms.

The final part of "A Manifesto" turned to another critical aspect of the debate: cultural pluralism. While being critical of the *Jāthika Chinthanaya* discourse, de Zoysa does not spare the liberal multicultural argument either. He zeroes in on Siriwardena's idea that within a liberal multicultural society, ethnic identities cannot be "erased" as was once assumed; instead, what could be attempted is to "contain" them to prevent them from becoming "antagonistic and destructive forms" (Siriwardena 1990). De Zoysa (1990) immediately picks up on the larger violence of such tolerance, something the likes of Slavoj Zizek would pick up on much later: "Now the word 'containment' is harsh", he writes. The problem, he argues, is that all modern nation-states are "federations of tribal, ethnic, or national identities" and that what would ultimately determine their survival is the economic relationship between the centre and the periphery. When it comes to minorities, he argues,

> this is the flaw in the argument in favour of 'tolerance, openness and pluralism' in the absence of strong national – and I mean national, not multinational – economic structures which will help convince minorities that they are a component part of national production.

In other words, de Zoysa's manifesto for an alternative world is one that is not multicultural in a liberal sense, but truly egalitarian in an economic sense, where minorities stand a genuine chance of equal participation in the political and economic life of the country. Ultimately, he writes, the "cosmetic mix" of cultural forms "that only hides the hopelessly ravaged face of society that lies underneath it" that is called popular culture in the country cannot provide the basis for a truly pluralistic society. To put it in his acid words, "Mendicant men of God, travelling circuses and politicians masquerading

as poets are not the stuff of which stable, pluralistic nations can be built".

For de Zoysa, global capitalism's homogenising cultural power was just as disastrous a formula to base a national culture on as the *Jāthika Chinthanaya.* He ends by returning to the debate on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, pointing out that the history unfolding in these regions is not an indicator of the failure of communism, per se, but a repudiation of "an extended form of Jathika Chinthanaya" that was seen to encompass a culture of greater Russia. Capitalist commercial culture, symbolised by "Coca Cola and Blue Jeans", or Siriwardena's *thuppahi* culture, cannot replace the solid ground on which a truly pluralistic society can be built:

> The answer is surely a secular state – truly secular state … guided by the principles of sound economic management within an ideological framework which does not carry within itself the seeds of either the extremism of *Jathika Chintanaya* or the potential anarchy of cultural populism.

Fast forward to 2025. The war, post-war peace for some, *Aragalaya*/*Porattam*, and even a tsunami have come and gone. As the postmodern markets turn on Richard de Zoysa, as political tables turn, and history's evening flashes vaguely on social-mediatised short memories, often lived vicariously, I try to imagine what Richard would have made of all the fuss.

His death has somehow become larger than his life, and we are compelled to ask, "*Mē kauda? Monawada karanne?*" Of course, he may simply say with characteristic irony, "for once you've seen Man on the kill /the spotted hunter fails to thrill" ("Birds, Beasts, and Relatives" 2000: 74); or he would contemplate on the big picture, the one that dissolves in a thousand narcissistic fragments of reality, call himself "impotent/ robbed of my power" ("The Poet" 2000: 106).

To remember the dead is to remember what was meant to be forgotten. It is hard not to feel sad, not only for Richard's intellectual energy and talent, but also for a whole generation of youth who thought that an alternative world was possible.

And in those moments, perhaps it is best to retreat into his love poems, the ones that belie the claim that he was just a frivolous lover. After everything we had to go through in a single lifetime, as cynicism slowly settles over a stray grey hair, I end with a love poem by Richard, "But I … /Funny! –/ I can feel a raindrop growing/At the corner of my eye" ("Corporation Love Song I" 2000: 82).

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