

# SRI LANKA A LAND LIKE NO OTHER?

Tourism magazines referred to Sri Lanka as the resplendent isle, the pearl of the Indian Ocean. Ironically, it has been branded as “A land like no other” or even ridiculously “The miracle of Asia”. The people of the land see it otherwise. There is a relatively new hierarchy of values practiced in Sri Lanka which reverse the traditional order, and have infiltrated our fundamental institutional structures (education, labour, politics, economy) through which destructive social norms are endorsed and crystallized. People now tend to take great pride in conforming to this socially-constructed emerging hierarchy of values, defining themselves, their worth and success in terms of volume of money and extent of power, proceeding blindly in a vain search for happiness, while the very foundations of the land are crumbling beneath their feet.

Rampant corruption in every conceivable sector has now become a curse in society, and is eating into its very foundations. Amazingly and absurdly, it is no longer a matter of shame, to be accused of corrupt practices. On the contrary, proponents of this despicable “art” are implicitly held in awe, and almost always rewarded for their ingenuity and duplicity.

The noble virtues of humility, love and compassion, foundations of our Buddhist culture have been replaced with crass hypocrisy, arrogant haughtiness and contemptuous behaviour towards people who represent compassion, honesty or integrity. This is done deliberately, to deter any resurgence of ethics or semblance of decency and thus promotes a culture that has already destroyed the land’s vital institutions.

In government offices, even ordinary officials and puny local politicians, strut about in self-assumed importance. This is in turn affecting the youth, who are emulating their peers, and indulging in masquerades that include lies and chicanery, to show off their ill-gotten possessions.

In other words, ordinary people have been overwhelmed by the pragmatics of the “corporate bottom line” that dominate our life-stage decision-making, turning money, which is essentially a means, into an end in itself, while turning fellow humans, ethically understood as “ends in themselves” into mere means of self-gain. This engenders a constant state of jealousy, resentment and competition. It then triggers people with meagre means, to steal and indulge in antisocial activities like soliciting bribes, drug peddling and smuggling to finance their lifestyle.

It is the extreme depravity to which our moral values have degenerated, when we find people being murdered for small pecuniary gains. Everyone in this poor country seems pre-occupied with money. Our children seem encouraged by parents, peers and societal norms to embrace wealth accumulation as their prime objective. One dares not revolt against such paradigms created by the market culture although social costs are ongoing and most palpable to all.

These attitudes and behaviours are unpardonable in any religion. Nevertheless,



people with such moral depravity, overtly seem to be religious.

Most of these people are “religious” in their daily routine, like offering daily prayers, worshipping at temples, and even

engaging in philanthropic activities, like giving charities or donations to religious bodies.

Their religious behaviour is a facade to hide their evil deeds, in the mistaken belief of atoning for their criminal or immoral activities. The more enterprising among them, use religion to promote their personal or political interests.

A people oppressed by hardship are by nature weak and incomplete, and hence seek divine help to overcome this imposed weakness. In the corporate business sphere, investors do not see investing as anything but a financial one. Instead of viewing investment as an opportunity to use excess funds to support socially responsible corporate activities, investors are motivated simply to use undistributed profits to make even more money for themselves, while maintaining a veneer of sensitivity by engaging in public activities that the state is responsible for.

Meanwhile, the helpless embrace religion to follow a path of self-improvement, and worship in the hope of getting peace in life, and salvation after death. In a sense, religion (largely Buddhist) has become representative of the love and fear of the unknown, completely antithetical to its original purpose.

People seem to follow religious customs as a matter of routine, a ritual, without imbibing or assimilating its virtues in their lives. They turn to religious fervour when faced with difficulties or uncertainties in life, like when they are in pain, or are facing anxious moments because of ill health or tension. Thus religion, that basically teaches us to lead a pious life, has been reduced to satisfying our need, or for emotional security only.

The reason for this is the highly materialistic nature of Sri Lankan society. In their haste to acquire the material comforts of life, they have obviated the basic tenet of

religion that is morality.

People habitually speak half-truths, or gross untruth, for the sake of winning an argument, a contract or an order. Thus a salesman, television advertisement or a politician, resorts to making tall promises, in the hope of bagging an order, stimulating an addiction or a crucial vote.

A company makes misleading advertisements, to catch and hold the attention of the target audience. It is another matter that their products belie the claim. Worst still are dubious companies, selling spurious products for making a quick buck, putting the lives of the innocent millions in peril.

It is therefore obvious that moral values have deteriorated to such an extent, that people are ready to exploit religion to serve their vested interests. The corrupt-to-the-core politicians, playing on religious sensibilities of the people, persevere in garnering votes and consequently more power and clout.

Basic economic theory suggests that physical resources are finite while our needs and wants are infinite. As such, failure to install another moral paradigm to consumption is a recipe for disaster. While this is not an inherent or necessary problem, in Sri Lanka it is socially constructed largely by how money has been prioritised above values and relationships. This contradiction in the social psyche, is being effectively exploited by politicians, to sow seeds of discord, leading to communal, domestic and industrial strife.

As evident in progressive countries, development in every sense is about the well-being of a nation’s people, and so it is values, relationships, and ethics that should be the end while wealth and power are merely secondary kinds of means. Therefore, we cannot complacently wear religion on our sleeves, to be used only at will.

Reintroducing the idea of moderation, equanimity and spiritual growth into this highly commoditized and materialistic society that can ill-afford luxury for the people is a battle of severe adversity.



**Lasantha Pethiyagoda**



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