

A few years ago, Lee Kwan Yu, Senior Minister of Singapore and former Prime Minister of that little island, wrote a book with the title: "The Singapore Story". Recently, we had a translation of that valuable work into Sinhala by Ranjith Guneratne of the Sri Lanka Overseas Service employed at the embassy in Singapore. The translated work carried the following message by Lee Kwan Yu, which should be memorised by every Sri Lankan and put into our school texts:

*"Through The Singapore Story which is my autobiography what I seek to achieve is to remind the younger generation of Singapore nationals who have been brought up in a more comfortable environment that we need to strive hard with great dedication to change our old familiar habits. Before Singapore was firmly on the path of success, we had to change our contradictory perceptions that tended to be a divisive influence of our people who belonged to many ethnic, religious and language groups. We also had to minimise the competitive tendency that existed between Trade Unions and Employers. What the Sinhala translation of this book makes clear to the people of Sri Lanka is that specially the Politicians of Singapore resisted and subdued any desire to address ethnic, language, cultural and religious forces with the intention of garnering votes. This enabled Singapore to avoid unnecessary, painful experiences. If ever such infuriating feelings arose they would have surely gone out of the window of logical wisdom and common good. What my generation of Singaporeans understood was this reality"*

Although not as big as Sri Lanka, Singapore is also a country inhabited by different groups of people bearing different ethnicities and religions. It has Malays, Chinese, and Tamils and a few other small groups and in this sense it once was a mere geographical entity with no common nationality to which its population could have looked up to. Like Sri Lanka, it had also come under British rule for a similar period of about 150 years. That was from the period 1819 to 1963. In 1963, Singapore obtained independence as part of The Federation of Malaysia; it separated from Malaysia two years later.

Under the vision of the great Lee Kwan Yu, Singapore stuck to the concept of a secular state with no particular religious identity. It adopted English, Malay, Mandarin Chinese, and Tamil as national languages. English became the common language of communication across all different groups.

The result: that country has had no racial or religious conflicts and everyone considers himself/herself first as "Singaporeans". In economic terms, Singapore had been behind Sri Lanka. Today, states the Encyclopaedia Wikipedia, "Singapore has seen its standard rise dramatically. Foreign investment and government-led island-wide industrialisation have created a modern economy based on electronics and manufacturing featuring entrepot and financial trade centering around the country's strategic location. The island-state has achieved Asian Tiger status after four decades of intense and open capitalist industrialization. In terms of GDP per capita, Singapore is the 18th wealthiest country in the world. The geographically small nation has a foreign reserve of \$ 212 billion (US \$ 139 billion). In terms of quality of life, The

Economist (2005) ranked Singapore highest in Asia and 11th in the world."

If this example does not ring a bell with any of us Sri Lankans then what will? Can't we find the clue to the mess we are in despite possessing much greater natural wealth and other material advantages than the country we are comparing with?

Firstly, Lee Kwan Yu stressed the acceptance of all communities as equals and disallowance of anybody taking political advantage of ethnic differences. Didn't politicians in Lanka not go to town with the open exploitation of ethnic and religious differences to their advantage? It were the British rulers who first germinated the seeds of communalism by allowing communal representation in the Legislative Council in the early part of the 20th century. Fortunately, the

Donoughmore Constitution in 1931 abandoned communal representation for territorial representation. It is a strong measure of the political immaturity of our people that the Mahawansa inspired cry about Lanka being the chosen land of Sinhala Buddhists has continued to be an emotional rallying slogan propagated by extremist leaders who disregard the hard reality of the vast changes in the demographic landscape of the island since the legendary days of the Mahawansa. This backward vision has been at the bottom of the movement for Tamil separatism. Tamil politicians, in their turn, took to exploiting underlying fears of Sinhala domination among the Tamil community after the departure of the foreign rulers. Even as I write this, the news is that the JHU wants the country to be declared a "Buddhist State"!

The second issue raised by Lee Kwan Yu is about employer-employee relations. "We also had to minimise the competitive tendency that existed between Trade Unions and Employers," he says. Singapore adopted the ideology of a more cooperative relationship between capital and labour. The opposite prevailed in Sri Lanka where our old Marxist 'doctors' succeeded in implanting hatred and antagonism toward employers among our workers. The latter preached that capitalism is a dirty word and they elevated socialism to the status of a sacred cow in the consciousness of our people. Be ready for the 'last struggle' against the capitalist class ('Anthima satanata sarasiyaw'), they shouted hoarse. The revolution, they cried, "was round the corner". The anthima satana and revolution, like Jesus, never came. After 1956 and until the JR economic revolution of 1977, every politician and every government had to

employ the socialist mantra. A kind of Robin Hood philosophy of taking from the rich and giving to the poor strangled the Lankan political economy and eventually made everyone poorer and poorer. No socialist country in the world ever became wealthy. The State Corporation was the principal instrument of socialism in Sri

Lanka and every possible economic activity was being taken over and handed over to a corporation. The corporation has been the most incompetent, corruption-ridden, and politicised institution in the country's history. The ghost of the old socialist rhetoric still haunts in the language of protest rallies today



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