

Some reflections on the book written by Michael Colin Cooke

There is nothing more entrancing than to watch men and to understand things human. In this context one of the men I wanted to come to know after my adoption in Australia is the gentleman known as Lionel Bopage. Lionel had been at the centre of the original JVP insurrection of 1971. As the rebellion was put down, a harsh government crackdown in the nature of a search and destroy operation had been launched. Lionel had to flee for his life. He went from country to country masquerading in various work roles to South Korea, Japan, and Switzerland until he was able to gain permanent sanctuary in Australia.

Described by historian Prof KM De Silva as probably the greatest rebellion of youths in history the phenomenon of the JVP of the Bopage days invites objective study by enquiring persons. It is a study that would have all-time relevance particularly to Third World countries. There is no doubt that Lionel Bopage, an engineer by profession, engineered the rebellion for the JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera. Leave aside the tragic toll of its outcome the romance of the movement does excite. How could these leaders have organized such an island-wide rebellion, setting up training camps in jungle and so on without authorities coming to know about it until the actual uprising? Why did it eventually flop? It is facile to disregard what happened and stupid to treat it all as evil.

These were some of the concerns I had in my mind when I became eager to meet a pivotal man in that movement - its General Secretary. Lionel Bopage had a troubled reception from many articulate persons in the Sri Lankan community at Canberra and Melbourne. This was to be expected. He brought with him the haunt of the trauma of JVP violence that led many Sri Lankans to leave the country to settle down in a safer environment. Those days there were a few political canards spread about Lionel in Canberra and Melbourne. I brushed them aside because I eschew hearsay and prefer a scientific approach in assessing a person. There is nothing like getting at the real thing through the path of hard evidence. Lionel has since come to live in Melbourne where I live and this facilitated my decision to get to know him. He visited our home in Dandenong and what a surprise that was! The personage I saw face to face for the first time was so suave, gentle and soft spoken. We have had many meetings since, and I have enjoyed them. This is not to state that I am in agreement with all his views.

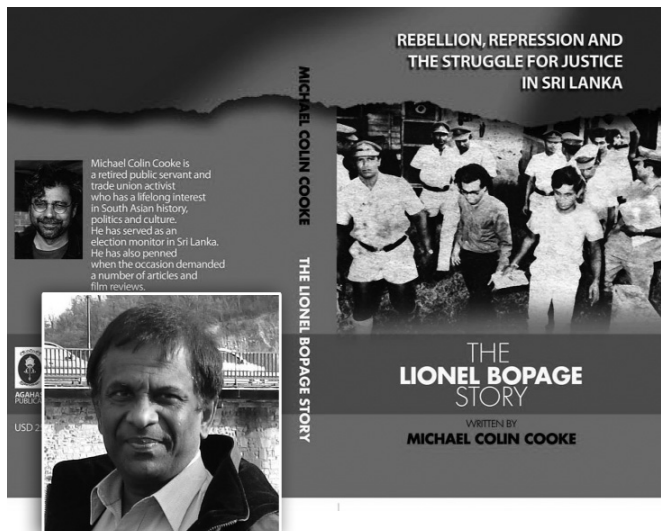
The book by Michael Colin Cook, a former trade union activist-turned scholar of South Asian politics, provides a graphic account of the hard life of a rebel in the Third World. Before Lionel Bopage fled for his life the government in Sri Lanka had on many occasions incarcerated him in detention camps and jailed him at Welikada. "while detained in London Place, my legs and hands were manacled to the bed when I was sleeping," the book quotes Lionel (p355). Looking back, one has to question the action of the Sri Lanka government in destroying some of the cream of our youth - apparently in their thousands. I once met a Deputy Minister during that time who admitted to me as a matter of self-achievement that he had got the police to burn over 10,000 youths down in Matara on just one night. A bonfire had been made, he said, of old tyres to cremate alive these young challengers. Sri Lanka is certainly not devoid of a tradition of holocaust-like human rights violation.

In the face of dissent and rebellion rulers should act with restraint and wisdom as much as firmness. They must try to learn from that dissent, get to the roots, and attempt to rectify grievances. The problem, as rightly suggested by Cook, was that the ruling class in Sri Lanka had lost solutions to these problems and had reached a dead-end. Given the misguided developments of our post-independence economic, ethnic and social policy the Sri Lankan ruling political class had been trapped in a deadlock that offered no solutions to the grow-

ing pressures from recalcitrant youths. They had brought the country to the brink both on the economic front and on the ethnic front. Leftist parties led by more erudite and learned men and women had themselves succumbed to bourgeois parliamentary comforts, and were disinclined to input their perspective into the planning and governing process.

Cook sets out Lionel Bopage's foray into the public arena against the background of this developing crisis in Sri Lanka and the failure of the left to move up to it. He discusses both the economic and ethnic dimensions of the growing crisis. Cook's book becomes valuable because it avoids the path of being

'THE LIONEL BOPAGE STORY' IS FASCINATING READING



a biological narrative and instead seeks to bring such a context into our comprehension of this revolt.

However, the narrative is not neglected. Bopage came from a poor family in Weligama. His father, an activist of the Communist Party, belonged to the disenfranchised left. Lionel had to walk three kilometres to go to school. A disadvantaged family background, an activist father and a sound personal education became the ingredients of Bopage's revolutionary make-up. Lionel was one of the many angry young men who perceived a country "beset by economic disparity, corruption and run by a venal and brutal elite" that had no interest in rectifying these issues. Cook states (p22) that Lionel sees "ethnicity as the ideological cover to mask these realities."

There were similarities in the profiles of Lionel and the founder of the JVP (Rohan Wijeweera) that he dedicated himself to. Wijeweera also hailed from down south (Kottegoda); his family was poor and his father was a Communist Party activist. The Movement that was formed was essentially a break off from the old left (Communist Party). The New Left drew its cadres from a totally different social milieu - poor peasant families and worker families. This new body of youthful leaders were largely Sinhala educated. They learned their Marxism from the five classes of instruction given by the seniors who themselves had largely read only patches of badly translated Sinhala versions of Marxist texts. Those who followed read new versions of the latter versions. Reading Cook's account of the five classes of instruction one gets the idea of a highly skewed and false presentation of the orthodox dogmas. In this way the JVP never had a proper ideological base; rather a confused one that was essentially negative about the current state of affairs and devoid of constructive paths beyond that. This is a point that Cook

has missed in his analysis.

I cannot understand why Michael Cook brings the agitation for Eelam as part of the Left movement within which the JVP was born (p17). The Eelam movement was plainly a racist movement both for Tamil defence and Tamil supremacy that emerged as a counterpart to the parallel movement of Sinhala racism. The fact is that many Sri Lankan political leaders acted all along on a hubris of the ethnic dominance of Sinhalese. They saw no need for an inclusive political arrangement that incorporates



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broadering with every government although the economy did not have the clout to bear such a program. One has to grow one's pie before distributing it. The discrepancy between growth and welfare led to continuing budgetary crises. Rural masses both amongst Tamil and Sinhala people suffered with deprivation while at the same time their expectations kept rising.

Extremist leaders on both sides thrived on such a situation. Instead of programs and policies to develop the country as a whole for all its population these leaders employed communalistic slogans that blamed 'the other' for their respective plights. The 'Sinhala only' cry was hailed as a panacea for the plight of the Sinhala masses. Secession was mooted as the option for the Tamil masses. Tensions mounted between the communities. SWRD's ascendancy unintentionally let the genie out. Partial secession gave way to militant secession efforts by Prabhakaran. Cook states that "one of the major themes of this biography was the inability of the body politic to develop a nationalism that transcended ethnicity." (p101). The roots of such inability lie in economics.

The JVP that Lionel put his heart and soul into had itself no plan that could hit at the roots of this issue. Youths hate inequity and injustice. Lionel, too, shared this hostility. On the other hand, the JVP had no practical ideology that could launch productivity and growth that alone could pave the way to eliminate "in-group" and "out-group" hostilities and move forward toward a genuine nationalism. Prabhakaran was also an opportunist who merely exploited the heightened racial consciousness of Tamil people to set up an authoritarian rule for himself. Marxism cannot bring in growth to sustain a fair welfare state for all. The dominant welfare economies of the West are predicated on growing national wealth where the national pie gets larger and larger. Incentives drive the capitalist state in a way that a socialist state or communist state cannot.

the aspirations of the Tamil community. India had with foresight followed a different path that has saved that huge landmass from segregationist movements. The assumption among many Sinhala leaders was that the Tamils would eventually be assimilated into the majority ways. However, the Tamil community was too entrenched to swallow the pill of assimilation. The hidden tension and fears among the Sinhalese were exploited for many decades by fundamentalist political leaders.

When Cook refers to SWRD (p47) as "a fiery and charismatic leader who coated his chauvinism in the rhetoric of the left" it sounds too harsh a judgement on that man. Cook is guilty of stereotypical thinking for SWRD was a more complex personality than that. SWRD, an Oxford educate liberal, did make many attempts at reconciliation with the Tamil leadership of SJV Chelvanayagam but his efforts had been stymied by the extremist lobby. SWRD never used chauvinistic language although Cook says he did. SWRD was more a vacillating opportunist who gave into Sinhala extremist forces. Later, Cooke (p51) takes a different turn and this more rightly: "By tapping into the genuine grievances of Sinhala masses Bandaranaikie let out of the bottle a genie of resentment of the 'other' that he could not control.

The second assessment yields a clue to a more accurate understanding of the emergence of radical "in-group" consciousness among the Sinhala people that made the latter vulnerable to the opportunistic rhetoric of extremist leaders. Despite the building of numerous irrigation works and measures to develop agriculture post-independence economic policies led to no genuine structural changes that in turn would have led to fast economic growth. Parallel with this stagnant growth and economic backwardness politicians launched wide-ranging welfare concessions. The welfare component kept

Michael Cooke's book gives valuable insight into the internal dynamics of a revolutionary group. The JVP was fundamentally a movement of romantics inspired by Latin American revolutions. Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, and Mao inspired them. Over time, even a once tight group becomes faction-ridden. There were struggles between two factions - one led by Piyaatileka and the other by Sanath-Loku Athula. Each tried to outbid the other in gamesmanship. It is suggested that Rohan Wijeweera had himself become megalomaniac and had developed his own kitchen cabinet thus incurring unrest among other leaders. Says Cook (p70) "the party was a personal fiefdom of Rohana Wijeweera, where he could play out his psychological pathologies." The final call to arms, just 18 months after the United Front government came to office, had been premature and was made by the Sanath-Athula faction.

The JVP rebellion was crushed and its leaders left the fold one by one for fear of state repression. Sanath-Loku Athula who spearheaded the revolt turned state witnesses and are now aligned with the rightist UPFA government. The once anti-West Lionel Bopage has obtained sanctuary in a kindly Western capitalist country. This final lesson of the JVP movement is that the ironies of human behaviour are an antidote to any kind of political idealism.