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# The Kurakkan Trail in Sri Lanka's Political Landscape

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by: Dr. Tissa Abeysekera &ldquo;Behind the fear were the hunger and the thirst, and behind the hunger and the thirst was fear again.&rdquo; Much has been said of how DA followed SWRD Bandaranaike across the well of the House of Parliament when the latter crossed-over into the Opposition ranks. For me there was a deep significance in that move. In that historic photograph, which I first saw as an unknowing little boy, D.A. Rajapaksa seems to follow Bandaranaike, effortlessly. For him, it was coming home. Perhaps he was never easy within the ranks which represented the privileged class. With that memorable line opens Leonard Woolf&rsquo;s novel, *Village in the Jungle*, which according to the great Chilean Poet Pablo Neruda is a masterpiece &lsquo;both true to life and literature&rsquo;. Woolf&rsquo;s line as quoted above sums up with almost clinical precision the harsh and brutal nature of life in the arid deep south of Sri Lanka at the turn of the last century.

It strikes the dominant chord of the novel which, despite the many variations in the narrative, is maintained consistently throughout. There is a photographic authenticity in the observation of detail and texture and an equally powerful reading of the dark caverns of the mind of the peasants who people the land. However, one thing is missing. From where do these people inherit the strength to survive? Perhaps it lies beyond the borders of Silindu&rsquo;s story and Woolf may not have looked too deep into the glazed eyes of the silent man who after years of gazing vacantly into nowhere explodes like a volcano with primordial fury. In him is the story of the deep south of our country. To seek the origins of that fury one needs to look beyond almost two centuries of darkness into what once upon-a-time was a continuing age of heroism and glory, of peace and plenty. The great south-west coastline of our island begins to curve eastwards beyond Point de Galle, gently almost imperceptibly at first, and then dramatically after Dondra - the southernmost tip of the land where there is a lighthouse. Moving eastwards up to the holy shrine of Kataragama, dedicated to Skanda, the God of War astride his Peacock Throne, the shoreline hems the vast Yala forest, an alternating design of earth brown open spaces irrupting continuously into medium heights, and stretches of giant trees enmeshed in tangled undergrowth all the way to Pottuvil at the bottom end of the east coast. Watered by the rivers Gin, Nilwala, Walawe, Kirindi and Kumbukkan, the land is a mighty arc and all around it keep rising to the Holy Peak of Sri Pada which stands on the edge of the central hills. This is the great plain of Bintenna the &lsquo;Earth Plain&rsquo; where the Buddha preached to two warring factions of adivasins or the indigenous, settled them and dedicated the land to the care of the great God Saman. Hon. D.A. Rajapaksa This is sunrise country and it is where history and legend meet. Beginning in the 02nd Century B.C., there began growing and evolving a great civilisation here. From the great city of Magampura in the south end which produced the hero of the Mahawamsa - The Great Chronical - Prince Gamini who unified the country and authored the birth of a nation, to a strangely located shrine of delicately carved stone pillars on the edge of the shore, Muhudu Maha Viharaya &lsquo;Great Temple on the Sea&rsquo; the region is studded and strewn with ruins both awe-inspiring and breathtaking in size and craftsmanship. Great battles were fought on these plains. Long ago almost on the fringes of oral history the two brothers, Gamini the Villainous, and Tissa the Pious, fought for their fathers&rsquo; throne at Yudaganawa where a massive dagabo remains, built to commemorate Gamini&rsquo;s victory. In the late 17th Century, the last Portuguese army of 65,000 veterans under the command of the celebrated general Dom Constantine de Sa marched through the region to surprise the Kandyan kingdom in an attack from the rear. As it reached the edge of the bottomlands and was about to begin the climb through the Haputale Pass into the hermit kingdom, the monsoon rains came. The Portuguese army halted at the village of Randeniwela. As night fell, in the dark and in the pouring rain, the Kandyans poured down the hillsides. A savage battle raged through the night and as the day dawned, the Portuguese army had been slaughtered almost up to a man. De Sa, the General specially brought down from Europe to subdue the unconquerable Kandyan kingdom, was among the dead. And so was Portuguese rule in the island. The Battle of Randeniwela enters history as one of the great events in our chequered history. It is against this backdrop that the Rajapaksa&rsquo;s of Medamulana enter the stage. They enter almost two centuries after Randeniwela and at a time when the region was still reeling from the &ldquo;Scorched Earth&rdquo; policy unleashed by the British in the terrible aftermath of the Uva Rebellion of 1818. Whole stretches of the once fertile lower Uva region below the Haputale Mountains were wiped out, depopulated and deforested in an unprecedented act of British Colonial terrorism. The recorded genealogy of the Rajapaksa family does not go too far back. The first to appear on the family tree is Vaniga Chintamani Mohotti Don Hendrick Appuhami, who, it is claimed, under the guidance and advice of the Bhikkus at the historic Temple of Mulgirigala, led the peasants of Giruwa Pattu in the 1818 Rebellion. Many decades later towards the end of the nineteenth century Don Davith Rajapaksa is appointed a Vidane Arachchi. The public service of the Rajapaksa&rsquo;s is resumed and it happens within a very specific socio-historical context. The Rajapaksa&rsquo;s were neither aristocrat nor peasants, but belonged to a newly emerging class of country gentry who were of a class in between. They were product of the social and economic liberalisation in this country consequent to the Colebrooke Reforms of 1833. Having broken free of the fetters of a feudal social hierarchy and through sheer personal enterprise accumulated enough wealth to challenge the aristocracy who dominated the rural social landscape through heredity, the newly emerging &lsquo;bourgeoisie&rsquo; had a certain radicalism ingrained in them. This conflict between the traditional aristocracy and the newly emerging &lsquo;rural bourgeoisie&rsquo; is one of the key strands in the social and political history of nineteenth century Sri Lanka. Unlike the traditional aristocracy who collaborated with the British and aped them, the new &lsquo;bourgeoisie remained close to the people and to their roots. The manors were open to the village folk unlike the Walauwes which were out-of-bounds for the hoi-polloi. Thus, when the Buddhist Revival began in the mid nineteenth century carrying with it the seeds of anti British feeling, the new class of country gentry emerging through the post Colebrooke liberalisation, immediately found a common political platform with them. The Buddhist Revivalist movement quickly developed into a mass national upsurge under charismatic leaders like Anagarika

Dharmapala and D.B. Jayatillake. They were pitted against the Anglicised pro British Sri Lankan aristocracy. The sentiments and political attitude of this comprador class were clearly expressed by S.C. Obeyesekere speaking in the Legislative Assembly on August 11th 1915 of the Sinhalese leaders jailed by the British for allegedly aiding anti Muslim riots: "Half a dozen misguided, designing villains - have been trying to pose as leaders of Buddhists. Had it not been for this encouragement, these disturbances would never have occurred - the proprietary peasant villagers - have been deluded into this trap for the personal aggrandisement of a few who are nobodies, but who hope to make somebodies of themselves by such disgraceful tactics." (Emphasis mine) It was from this class, denounced as nobodies who hope to make somebodies of themselves, that the first Rajapaksa, Don Mathew, the second son of Don Davith enters the political stage. In the 2nd State Council of 1936, elected under universal franchise granted by the Donoughmore Constitution, D.M. Rajapaksa represented the vast Hambantota District and very soon came to be called "The Lion of Ruhuna" for his fearless championing of the cause of the oppressed and suffering peasants of Giruwa Pattu. These were the people of whom Woolf in his autobiography *Growing* (p.180) observes thus: "I worked all day from the moment I got up in the morning until the moment I went to bed at night, for I rarely thought of anything else except the district and the people. There was no sentimentality about this; I did not idealise or romanticise the people of the country; I just liked them aesthetically..." It is a confession of rare candour but it also disturbs. The suffering Silindu, Punchi Menika and Babun, each one being devoured by a cruel and irrevocable fate, are only grist for the creative mill of an English writer from Bloomsbury. For Don Mathew Rajapaksa of Medamulana in Giruwa Pattu they were of his flesh and blood, to be protected, nursed and saved; because he was of them and they were of him. This togetherness with the rural masses displayed by the newly emerging country gentry in the late and early nineteenth centuries in Sri Lanka is a social condition arising out of colonial oppression, but also from the liberating economic circumstances created by the Colebrooke Reforms. It carried with it the seeds of both anti imperialism and anti feudalism. The Buddhist heritage held the country gentry and the rural peasantry in a common bond, and both social segments were united in their hostility to the lowly Anglicising feudal hierarchy who had oppressed and exploited them even before the British. Thus when the Left movement began here in the early nineteen-thirties, originally as a middle-class intellectual activity by a brilliant group of urban and western educated radical youth, it percolated to the lower levels and struck roots in the rural sector essentially through the leadership of scions of the families who in the nineteenth century had become Somebodies. The Gunawardenas of Boralugoda in the Kelani Valley, the Wickremasinghas of Nilwala Valley in the Matara District and the Rajapaksas of Giruwa Pattu in the deep-south were the missionaries of socialism in their respective domains. Their wealth was a result of a primitive accumulation of capital which begins in the early British period, or perhaps even before, in the closing days of Dutch rule. As observed by Kumari Jayawardene who documents this period in her wonderful book, *Nobodies to Somebodies*. "..... there were perceivable changes in economic and social life, which were significant in comparison with the relative stagnation that had existed before. It was in this phase of Sri Lanka's history that the bourgeoisie made a swift ascent, enriching itself from the economic changes opened up." This newly emerging class of landowners, whose extensive acres of paddy land were worked by sharecroppers drawn from the rural peasantry, unlike their counterparts, the Kulaks of Russia who fiercely resisted the October Revolution and the Zamindars of India who oppressed the peasants, were an integral part of the broad rural-agrarian culture which through the Buddhist reawakening was slowly becoming anti British and therefore anti-feudal. For those who were aware of this narrative, it was logical that the Paddy Lands Act of 1957, one of the most radical and revolutionary pieces of Parliamentary legislation in this country by which the sharecroppers were granted outright ownership to the plots they worked, was engineered by a Gunawardene from Boaralugoda ably assisted by a Rajapaksa from Giruwa Pattu. Don Alwin Rajapaksa succeeded to the political and social programme of his elder brother, Don Mathew, the "Lion of Ruhuna" better known as DM. The successor was even more of the people, for DA had grown up exclusively in his village. He was of the temple and the field. When DM suddenly collapsed in the State Council and died a few days later on the 18th of May 1945, DA was the obvious choice of the people to take over from his brother. It is said that he resisted the offer and when the day of nominations was drawing near, a large group of villagers surrounded him on a paddy field where he was ploughing, pulled him out of the mud and made him sign the necessary papers. No one came forward to contest him. It was a foregone conclusion. The "Lion of Ruhuna" had served his people so well and with such commitment for nine years from 1936 to 1945, that when his brother came forward to succeed him, the grateful peasants of Hambantota district needed no choice. D.A. Rajapaksa began his career in politics as an uncontested representative of his people. Behind that stunning debut was the long history was the accumulated power and authority that we have tried to recount so far. It was another phase in the slow rebirth of a region once plundered and burnt and devastated by the British. Much has been said of how DA followed SWRD Bandaranaike across the well of the House of Parliament when the latter crossed-over into the Opposition ranks. For me, there was a deep significance in that move. When the Oxford educated and highly aristocratic SWRD Bandaranaike from Horagolla opted to leave his class to serve the people and give leadership to the poor and the downtrodden, it was for him a painful metamorphosis. He had with a tremendous will de-classed himself. As he confessed in his brilliant speech after "crossing the Rubicon" "I conquered myself". In that historic photograph, which I first saw as an unknowing little boy, D.A. Rajapaksa seems to follow Bandaranaike, effortlessly. For him, it was coming home. Perhaps he was never easy within the ranks which represented the privileged class. It could not have been a purely cerebral thing or one of intellectual attitude like in most of the legendary Left leaders. He was among strangers, and given the first opportunity went where he belonged. For a man who, when he was a Minister, stepped out of his car to let a peasant woman in labour to be rushed to hospital while he stood for over an hour by the roadside, surrounded by unbelieving villagers, where else could he have been, other than with the descendants of Silindu? If the Sri Lankan social revolution with its genesis in the Surya Mal Movement and flowering under the intellectual leadership of the legendary Left leaders had to close ranks with the National Bourgeoisie and

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accept the leadership of the social democratic forces, it had to, in the final phase, come to terms with the fourth generation of that class which emerged in the vast rural-agrarian space of nineteenth century Sri Lanka. It was a class not clearly defined in the Marxist textbook. Even when it was vaguely acknowledged, it was considered, conservative and reactionary because it was tied to the land and resisted social mobility. But in Sri Lanka, it was this class springing from sturdy peasant roots, and with an unconquerable spirit of dignity and self reliance, who had always formed the bulwark of national liberation. From the dawn of the twentieth century, they became the leaders of the struggle for social emancipation. There were those who went to the right but the majority were always firmly left of centre. The son of the man who &quot;went home&quot; with SWRD Bandaranaike in 1951 is now at the helm. It is not surprising that his election manifesto has, and for the first time since independence, laid out a grand plan for a &quot;Back to the Country&quot; move. It is only a logical conclusion to a drift begun way back in the early nineteenth century. In that narrative, three generations of the Rajapaksas have moved consistently from the periphery into the centre. The corn-coloured shawl which D.M. Rajapaksa first sported when he first sat in the State Council in 1936 as the icon of the peasants of Giruwa Pattu who lived precariously, &quot;slashing and burning&quot; chenas to grow Kurakkan for mere subsistence, has passed through the three generations and today has become the central motif. Perhaps it is a grail we are after. Look beyond personalities, as Marx has told us, and divine the flow of history. (Courtesy : Daily News )