
A YEAR OF ANNIVERSARIES FROM PURAN APPU TO THE HARTAL

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by: Dayan Jayatileka This is a year beaded as a necklace with anniversaries. Some are past us, some ahead. Some are international, the others national. Some are of heroism, others of tragedy and darkness. All are significant. All teach us something, provide occasions for reflection. Internationally it was the 40th commemoration of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the student uprisings of May 1968 most significantly in Paris, the 80th birth anniversary of Ernesto Che Guevara, and the 55th anniversary of the Moncada uprising which initiated the Cuban revolutionary process. Nationally, it is the 60th anniversary year of Sri Lanka's Independence and the 50th and 25th anniversary year of two large blots on that existence as an independent country: 1958 and 1983. This year also contains triple anniversaries of heroic uprisings of our people: the anti-colonial armed rebellions of 1818 and 1848 and the 55th anniversary of the Hartal of August 1953. The anniversaries of the 1818 and 1848 anti-colonial uprisings are best commemorated by re-kindling the spirit of Keppitipola and Puran Appu, sustaining the ongoing military drive for the country's reunification, taking it to the next level while remembering the atrocities committed against us by imperialism which in its contemporary form, impinges upon our attempt to reunite our motherland. Though less sustained and widespread than the Rebellion of 1818, that of 1848 warrants greater retrospection. Imagine the spirit of those who rose up in rebellion against the world's mightiest military power, which thirty years before, had mercilessly suppressed the uprising of 1818? Coming from the urban-coastal area, Puran Appu had seen British colonial power at its most concentrated, and yet he was undaunted. To quell the 1848 rebellion British reinforcements were brought in from India, and Governor Torrington confirmed in an official letter (archived at Durham university) that Puran Appu was correct when he claimed that had his mother given birth to a dozen men like him there would not have been a single White man remaining in the Kandyan provinces. The Governor writes that "we should have surely lost the country for a while". A century of pacification: 1848-1948 The sources of Sri Lanka's tragic contemporary history are located in the events commemorated by two of these anniversaries: the 1848 rebellion and the execution of Puran Appu, and the Hartal or popular uprising of 1953. The first reason is the absence of a follow up to the 1848 uprising. Throughout the world, failed uprisings generated still others, fuelled by the heroism of their forerunner and memories passed down by survivors, oral history and written chronicles, to the younger generations. This did not happen in the case of Puran Appu who had been able to transcend the upcountry/low country, urban-rural and more significantly the caste divide in an anti-colonial armed rebellion. It is possible that class and caste prejudice had much to do with the inaudibility of the echo of that rebellion. However it does not explain why a new generation of anti-imperialists, the late emerging Sri Lankan left movement, did not actively rekindle his memory and that of the 1848 rebellion. A reverse class prejudice could be one reason. The dominant nucleus of the Lankan Left had a narrow notion of class struggle under colonialism and Puran Appu did not fit the bill of a proletarian. This tells us more about the Left than it does about Puran Appu, because the Cuban revolutionaries always saluted their rebellious patriotic predecessors, whatever the class origins of the latter. In 1968, with the Cuban revolution at its most radically Communist, Fidel Castro described theirs as the end product of "a hundred years of struggle". Piloting his project of "a 21st century Socialism", Venezuela's President Chavez designates his revolution and his republic "Bolivarian", in honour of Simon Bolivar the Liberator, who died in 1830. The Ceylonese Marxists sought to do no such thing, make no such connection, no return to roots in rebellion. The hundred years since the 1848 armed rebellion and Puran Appu were not followed by a replay or rectified version, but by an essentially pacifistic though verbally violent, parochial, divisive, religio-cultural revivalism. It was paralleled by an utterly gradualist legislative-reformism, followed by a quaint Leftism, rhetorically impassioned but cut-off from the great river of Asian Marxist militancy represented by Ho Chi Minh, Mao Ze Dong, Zhou en Lai and the Indian Communists. The scenario sixty years ago It is against this backdrop of forces that we gained Independence sixty years ago. It is faddish to regard our first post independence administration as something of a golden age, when our citizens inhabited a Garden of Eden from which the fall from grace occurred with Bandaranaike and 1956. The briefest glance at the record shows this to be a hollow view. That first administration had so slim an electoral base, that had it not been for the sectarianism of the Trotskyite left, a different, progressive government could have been easily formed. Never had the Left performed better than at the 1947 election, and at the now famous Yamuna discussions, efforts were made to unite the various tendencies of the Left with the independent nationalists, which could have resulted in a progressive coalition government. Dr Colvin R de Silva denounced the effort as one that would give birth to a "three headed donkey". The same Left was to enter coalitions with the fully formed SLFP, constituting a bloc in which its influence was far less than it would have been in 1947. One hesitates to think of the kind of animal symbol that could do justice to those subsequent coalitions. The first post independence UNP administration was not only possessed of a slender popular base, its disenfranchisement of the Hill Country Tamils also provoked the strategic political schism that has persisted until this day: the breakaway of SJV Chelvanayagam and the launching of the Tamil Federalist project. The dream of a united, broadly inclusive national identity was betrayed almost a decade before SWRD Bandaranaike and 1956. If one had to identify the Original Sin, I would say it was the decision to split the Ceylon National Congress (CNC) and form the United National Party (UNP) instead. August 1953: Hartal Between Independence sixty years ago, and the policy of Sinhala Only of 56, came the popular uprising, the Hartal of August 1953, the 55th anniversary of which falls on August 12-13th. It is the abortion by the Left leadership of the Hartal that led to the particular form of the 1956 outcome. The Hartal was called by the Left to protest the savage cutback in food subsidy by the second UNP administration of the post Independence period. The cutbacks themselves revealed the utter social insensitivity of the post colonial power-bloc as represented by the UNP. It would have been an impossible task to build a nation on so narrow a social base. A snapshot of August 1953 shows a coming together of social and political forces of a width that was never to be repeated. Organized urban workers and poor people, men and women, Sinhalese and Tamils, Left parties, Hill-country Tamil plantation workers and

Federalists, all participated. The fledgling SLFP, while not an official participant, supported the Hartal, and SWRD Bandaranaike presided over the Hartal rally at Galle Face Green. Thus, the anti-UNP, anti-comprador alliance in struggle gave pride of place to the convergence of the working people of South and North, with the nascent national bourgeoisie represented by the SLFP playing only an auxiliary role. A scant three years later, these roles were to be reversed and national bourgeois leadership was established over the anti-UNP struggle, with all else that came with the narrowing of ideological and programmatic realms-- including "Sinhala Only". This reversal of roles was the by product of the abandonment of the Hartal by those who summoned it, namely the parties of the Left. The people responded magnificently to the Hartal call, with women baking hoppers on rail tracks to stop trains. The government cracked down harshly with Police shootings accounting for several fatalities. The people stood firm and the government was evacuated to a US ship waiting offshore--as sound evidence as any of the impossibility of nation building by a wholly non-national, pro-imperialist comprador administration. The Lankan left It is at this moment of opportunity that the Ceylonese Left revealed its authentic character, and the country's history began shifting onto an alternative track. Only a fortnight apart in exactly the same year, an uprising had taken place in another tropical island across the world. That was the Moncada attack of July 26th 1953 (about which I have written in these pages on Saturday July 26, 2008). True, the despotic character of the Cuban regime necessitated an armed uprising, as the Ceylonese situation did not. However, the failed Moncada uprising led to victorious final outcome years later, as the successful Ceylonese "Hartal" would not. This paradox is explicable by the wholly divergent attitudes displayed by Fidel Castro on the one hand and the Lankan Left leaders on the other. As striking a contrast in the spirit of rebellion is provided by the events on the island of Ceylon itself, during the same months July--August roughly a century before, when the armed Sinhala rebels led by Puran Appu stormed and overran the British fortress at Matale. In an almost unprecedented act in the history of the global left in the face of the virtual abdication by a capitalist government and a power vacuum, the left leaders called off the Hartal, and went onto promise in Parliament (the Hansard of the day provides the proof) that there would not be a repetition. That promise, made to the bourgeoisie, is one that the Left would keep. No one can fault the Left for not seizing power, but what is aberrant from the perspective of comparative international politics are its two consecutive choices: firstly, not to continue the Hartal, pushing its success further, exploring its limits, aiming for the most progressive possible outcome, and secondly, not to make its post-Hartal political project one of a united front of all forces which had participated in or supported the popular upsurge (this would have meant the SLFP, the CWC and the Federal party, but under Left hegemony). With this avenue being blocked by the Left leaders, the national and social struggle found an alternative leadership, pathway and programme, that of the national bourgeois SLFP, parliamentary elections and Sinhala Only. That too was not inevitable. A document available in the superb archives of the ILO here in Geneva reports the Parliamentary proceedings in Ceylon in 1954, the year after the Hartal, in which the Government reiterates its commitment to the full transition within eight years to Sinhala and Tamil as the languages of public administration. So Sinhala Only was not the only way to dislodge the hegemony of English. The process of transition was already underway and to a fairer, more inclusive solution. Also unfounded is the received wisdom that the SLFP simply had to agree to the slogan of Sinhala Only so as to defeat the UNP at the '56 election. The Hartal of 1953 had already broken the back of the UNP and its post-'53 leadership was even more alienated from the national aspirations than its predecessor. In the very next year, 1955, the slogan of Sinhala Only was raised by the more parochial civil society lobbies, and adopted by the SLFP in a change of policy stance. At its founding in 1951 and in its first General election manifesto in 1952 the SLFP had stood for "Swabasha as national languages", meaning Sinhala and Tamil, not Sinhala Only. This was the stand of the SLFP that supported the Hartal. But a national bourgeois party was naturally more susceptible to the pressure of the provincial petty bourgeoisie. Thus instead of the broad, multi ethnic popular bloc led by the working people of the Hartal of 1953, came the Pancha Maha Balavegaya of 1956, with the workers and peasants bringing up the rear, and that too in reverse order ("govi-kamkaru"). A Left lost in translation The dominant trend of old Lankan Left was to give birth to a younger generation that was an even greater oddity than itself, in that its leaders returned from the West of the late '60s in which Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh and Mao Ze Dong were the heroes (as they were for radicalized students worldwide), and made the strange choice to follow instead the nondescript British Trotskyites Ted Grant and Gerry Healey. A far more serious Left, which related itself to the tradition of armed resistance in Sinhala history, was born with Rohana Wijeweera and the JVP and manifested in the April 1971 Insurrection. Nonetheless this was a Left diminished and distorted by its "lateness"; a post-Sinhala Only Left and therefore a mono-ethnic Sinhala Only Left, which neither sought nor saw common cause with the strong anti-caste struggle led by the Jaffna branch of the Maoist Communist party. The JVP's second edition in the 1980s would be even worse, a sociopathic post-Standardization Left. The tragic contemporary history of Sri Lanka was determined at least in part by the Hartal, its freezing and abandonment fifty five years ago, resulting in the current polarization between the non-national/anti-national on the one hand (the "peace" lobby of UNP Right and soft Left) and the narrow ethno-religious national ("patriots" of populist Left and radical religious Right) on the other. The Lankan Left leadership of that time did not see itself as the inheritor and continuator of the rebellion of 1848, the 160th anniversary of which we should be celebrating. The Left leaders lacked anything like the spirit of risk and resistance of that insurrection and its leader, the great rebel Puran Appu, who was executed by the British Empire on August 8th, 160 years ago. Despite the affront of arrogant social apartheid that continued throughout the period of British imperial domination of Ceylon, nobody picked up his rifle. (These are the personal views of the writer) (Courtesy : The Island)