

PETER SCHALK

## The Political Suspension of Ethics

### Proposals for a Historical Study of Reversal of Values in a Situation of Martial Conflict in Lanka

#### Generalities

The overall aim of this project is to focus on the general socio-economic and political conditions leading to martial conflict in relation to religious and secular values, value systems and ideologies in Īlam/Lamkā, with special regard to their transformation. It deals with the extent of reversal and re-reversal in the course of the conflict and reconciliation respectively. These values are reversed through political decisions in a martial situation. It is true that martial conflicts arise over the distribution of resources and territory and not over theological issues. When, however, religion is placed in a martial context and related to the interests of one group, then even a sophisticated theology can take the form of an identity-bestowing ideology and adopt martial doctrines such as the concept of just war. Territorial and social definitions of citizenship are replaced by definitions relating to sacred boundaries. Christianity may turn into German Christianity or Serbian Christianity, Hinduism into Hindūtva and Buddhism into Siṃhalatva.<sup>1</sup> The overall martial context is finally symbolised in religion as an identity marker alongside sacralisation of language, history, and territory, etc. This martial context generates a religious surplus even within secular ideologies and leads both to a suspension and a reversal of values in established religions. The proponents are ideologues, including monks and priests, and politicians in the widest sense. They become warmongers in a martial situation, where they become 'authentic' and authoritative. In a non-war situation they are marginalised as extremists. During war, they

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1 *Siṃhalatva* is an emic term launched at the end of the 1990s by Nalin de Silva. It means 'Sinhaleseness'. It parallels, and is associated with, Hindūtva, 'Hinduness'.

suspend fundamental human values, but they 'suspend' in the specifically German (Hegelian) sense of *aufheben*, meaning to elevate, to save and to call off. They do not annihilate these values, only to recall and retrieve them during truces and cease-fires, in situations of non-war, and diplomatic or ecumenical encounters, or during academic conferences.

In times of martial conflict, ideologues, as advocates of war, actualize ways of integrating violence into non-violent traditions. I refer to five ways of rationalizing violence, which have global parallels in martial societies. The first way is the well-known and popular reasoning about the holy 'end' that justifies the less holy 'means'. It is so commonly found in martial politics that little attention is paid to it. This reasoning reverses, however crudely, both Gandhian and some Buddhist principles which require that the 'means' should be of the same quality as the 'end'. From the perspectives of some idealistic Gandhians and some Buddhists it is not possible to achieve peace through war, but it is possible to achieve peace through non-violent means like *satyāgraha*<sup>2</sup> and/or *satipatṭhāna*.<sup>3</sup> *Siṃhalatva* of the Lankans<sup>4</sup> and the *maṛavar*<sup>5</sup> and the martyr ideology of the *Īavar*,<sup>6</sup> both being opposed to martial ideologies, preclude the possibility of achieving peace through war. They have had to suspend parts of their own culture.

The second line of reasoning points to an alleged connection between present and past ideal persons or events. An ideal past is invoked and connected with acts that in a situation of peace would be classified as immoral, such as the use of violence in political life. Both *Īavar* and *Siṃhalatva* followers are sophisticated in their use of this kind of justification of violence.

The third way of rationalizing violence introduces a de-eschatologizing

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2 *Satyāgraha* means 'grasping for truth' and refers to methods of civil disobedience.

3 *Satipatṭhāna* means 'application of mindfulness' and refers to a method of meditation within theravāda.

4 Lankans are those who promote a unitary or united state.

5 *Maṛavar* means 'those who have *maṛam* (wrath)', which is the same as 'warrior'. The word is used by Vēluppiḷai Pirapākaraṇ.

6 *Īavar* are those who promote a separate or autonomous state of TamilĪlam. Both Lankans and *Īavar* are emic concepts. *Īavar* (sing. *Īavan*) means 'those from Īlam'. *Īlam* is Tamil and is one of the oldest toponyms for the island as a whole, older than *laṃkā*. In the present context, however, *Īlam* refers to Tamil-Īlam.

distinction between preliminary and final 'ends', which is different from the distinction between 'means' and 'ends' mentioned above. The distinction between preliminary and ultimate 'ends' implies that the final 'end', for example *nirvāna*, is suspended. This creates space and time for action.

A fourth way is to make a distinction between an elite and the common people; the latter are allegedly not capable of following the noble principles of the elite. They are 'mundane' and, therefore, the canonical literature allegedly recognizes that they engage in war. These preliminary 'mundane' aims may be political aims promoted during a period when the final aims are suspended for one social class. Political Buddhism, especially *Siṃhalatva*, precludes such reasoning which de-eschatologizes Buddhism as a soteriology and transforms Buddhist concepts into political stereotypes. These are used as tools in street fighting, in pogroms, and in political discourse in the Lankan Parliament.

A fifth and final method, which is rather unsophisticated, is historical revisionism. Its radical forms deny that violence has been used against ethnic minorities. Historical revisionism provides a *carte blanche* for the future use of violence. Recognition of these historical conflicts is, however, a necessary precondition for reconciliation.

## Specifics

I propose three approaches to the study of the suspension of values and their reversals in a martial situation in Lanka.

1. I suggest a study of Buddhist militant political movements from the 1940s up to the *Jātika Hāla Urumaya* (JHU), which are all based on an ethno-nationalist concept known as *Siṃhalatva* developed by ideologues among both monks and laymen. The JHU established itself as a political party in the parliamentary elections of 2 April 2004 and gained 5.97 per cent of the votes and nine seats in Parliament under the name of *Jathika Hela Urumaya*, 'National *Siṃhala* Heritage'. The nine MPs are monks. It is a clear deviation from the *Vinaya* for a monk to take up a political post. *Siṃhalatva* leaves no place for other groups to share power. A multi-ethnic society is rejected. Again, the strength of *Siṃhalatva* lies in the fact that it has the support of the Constitution when defending the concept of a unitary state. I have elsewhere coined the expression *dharmacracy* to describe the concept of a totalitarian Buddhist state that *Siṃhalatva* projects.

In the 1980s, I counted more than 100 organisations with *Siṃhalatva*

as their ideology. It is possible to trace some of them back to the beginning of national independence in 1948. Some of them have changed their names, leaders have come and gone, their propaganda methods have changed from verbal abuse to physical violence, but the ultimate aim has remained the establishment of a unitary state, and the main method, to enlist Buddhist concepts to this end, has remained unchanged.

*Siṃhalatva* is a political ethno-nationalist ideology with a strong base also in the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, which includes a special identifiable section known as the *siṃhalatva kavandaya*, 'the Siṃhalatva body'. However, Siṃhalatva is mostly spread anonymously among individuals and represented by Buddhist militants. Its strength is not evident merely from the number of public followers, but from the overt consent of members of other parties and, above all, from the silent consent of many anonymous persons in civil life.

The JHU reverses fundamental concepts of Buddhism, while developing other Buddhist concepts produced in the past. Buddhism is not a single entity. This statement is a truism to specialists in the history of religions, but not everyone is a specialist. In Lanka, the Pāli canon is not the only source of inspiration for thinking, speaking and acting in private and public life. The formation of the canon took about 800 years and it contains many different layers and opinions as a result. A second source of inspiration for Buddhists is the Vaṃsī or Chronical tradition which developed in Lanka even into the colonial period. A third source is foreign traditions representing religions, political ideologies, evaluations of life and worldviews. Among these, we find racial and racist ideas which were applied to and internalised by Tamils and Siṃhalas from the late nineteenth century onwards. The Vaṃsī sectarian Theravāda view, which was also anti-Mahāyāna, was reasserted by Siṃhalatva in the twentieth century, but combined with an additional new view, namely that Buddhism is a racial trait of Siṃhalas only. It merged sectarianism with racism and made it difficult for Tamils to convert to Buddhism.

*Siṃhalatva* has two ideological pillars. One is the interpretation of *dhammadīpa* as an island of the *dhamma* for the Siṃhalas only. The concept of *dhammadīpa*, which originally referred to the *dhamma* of the Buddha as a lamp (*dīpa*), was re-interpreted as the island (*dīpa*) of the Siṃhala Buddhist only (and the historical concept of *eka chatta*, 'one umbrella', anachronistically as a unitary state).

The other pillar is the formula *īlam<sihaḷa*, which is interpreted in an anti-Tamil way. It states that the old Tamil toponym *īlam* is not Tamil, but a derivation through stem mutation from *sīhaḷa*. Therefore, having no Tamil

toponym, the Tamils have allegedly no founding tradition of early settlements, but are represented as latecomers to the island.

The basis for such a study of Simhalatva and militant Buddhist societies already exists in a number of works, but an academic case study specifically of the JHU is still lacking. Let us call the project *Simhalatva: The Case of the Jātika Hāla Urumaya* (JHU).

The study should focus on the polemic of the JHU. Polemic is seen here not only as violence of language, but also as the language of and for polarisation and violence. This language is part of a martial context in historical dynastic/territorial conflicts or present ethnic/territorial conflicts in South Asia and elsewhere. A study of religious disputes *per se* is not envisaged. Polemic is not a simple dispute. Polemic is a symbolic expression of a demarcation of one's territory, of a rejection of co-operation, of a wish to cleanse, but also of a wish to defend the rights of a dominated group against a dominating group. Religious polemic may focus on the adversary's soteriology, theology, moral system or rituals, but implies something else, which is determined by the context. Hindūtva and Simhalatva polemic not only pinpoint minorities' 'inimical' doctrines and old injustices from the colonial period, but also, and mainly, religious pluralism or secularism.

2. I suggest a second study called *For a Contested Past. Divided Memories among Lankans and Īlavar*. In divided countries like the former West Germany and East Germany, North Korea and South Korea, Turkey and Kurdistan, Israel and Palestine, etc., intellectuals even construct and consciously uphold a divided memory of the past. They alternate between memory and history and even blend the two to finally present memory as history. The civil war has also affected historical writing on both the Īlavar and the Lankan side. The same events from the past are remembered in epigraphy, in social, political, economic, art and religious history in incompatible ways, and in accordance with the authors' own stipulated and contradictory political aims.

Schoolbooks and academic studies of history are particularly good sources for analysing principles that guide the writing of normative presentations about the past. These guiding principles reflect Simhala and Tamil cultural interests. Archaeology, epigraphy, religious studies, and even linguistics are divided and thus produce antagonistic memories about the past. Romila Thapar's contestation of history written by Hindūtva activists and Kumari Jayawardhana's contestation of history written by Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalists were a good start, followed by

R. A. L. H. Gunawardena's attempts, but the Lankan analysts' works were biased. Tamil ideological writings on history were considered only marginally. Moreover, much more contemporary material about the past has now been produced, not only schoolbooks, but also academic monographs, which can be used as sources for a study of a divided memory.

The vāddō is a special group whose memory of the past is quite different from that of the Siṃhala and Tamil establishment. Another special group are the Muslims, whose memory differs from that of the establishment.

One approach would be to make a selection of key events and study how they appear in the writings of Tamil and Siṃhala intellectuals. The description of past events by scholars and autodidacts is explicitly or implicitly dominated by the fundamental question: who was first? One such retrieved event is the pre-colonial dynastic and territorial martial invasion in Lanka. It resulted in martial anti-Tamil interpretations by militant Buddhists. This event remains in the collective memory today.

Another outcome of a divided memory is the use of historical revisionism; it either denies or reinterprets embarrassing historical facts.

3. I finally suggest a study called *The Concept of Tiyākam among Īavar*. *Tiyākam* is Tamilised Sanskrit and means 'abandonment', here 'abandonment (of life)'. It refers to the concept of martyrdom of the LTTE that is supported by Īavar. It reverses a fundamental view of life as ultimate value. As a principle the concept orders: 'die to win (Tamiḷiḷam)'. Life is a weapon (*uyir āyutam*) to be used to slay the Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF). A similar reversing principle is found globally in many martyrologies, in crusading Christianity, in Maccabean Judaism, in Jihadistic Islam, in martial Sikhism, in Hindu epic heroic traditions, in aggressive nationalist and secular ideologies, etc., but the extent of its implementation in the LTTE is surprising. The concept of *tiyākam* was adopted in the 1980s by the *māvīrar paṇimaṇai*, the 'office of the great heroes', of the LTTE, and was developed by thinkers, not least by Catholic thinkers within the LTTE. A Martyrs' or Heroes' day (*māvīrar nāl*) is celebrated annually on November 27 also among Īavar in exile. The day reminds them of the sacrifices that have been and will have to be made for the attainment of Tamiḷiḷam. The sources for a study of the concept of *tiyākam* are mostly in Tamil and form a large and varied corpus; there are written texts, videos, CDs, and DVDs. LTTE martyrology is one of the counter-ideologies to Siṃhalatva. It is also influenced by other national and transnational ideologies and represents a break with traditional Tamil values in several respects. The martial femi-

nism of female fighters within the LTTE deserves special attention.

## Strategies

How should one study the process of reversal and re-reversal of values by religionists and ideologues in the conflicts in Lanka?

1. *Typological comparison.* The project will analyse cases of reversals of values in martial conflicts in Europe, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. A typology of the conflicts themselves will also be included. The case of Lanka represents a territorial conflict with ethnic overtones. One important task will be to relate types of reversals of values to types of conflicts.

2. *Historical comparison.* The project includes historians who will study:

- the transformation of a peaceful conflict into a violent one,
- the material causes of the conflict, the development of concepts of identity and its dimensions,
- long-term trends from secularism and modernisation to religion and (seemingly) traditional values,
- the change in principal actors as part of increasing mobilisation and democratisation of a population, and
- the effects of modernisation such as Westernisation and its failure.

The perspective should be extended by including historical and semantic analyses of essential and emic concepts and their interpretation in a religious, political, and socio-historical context. The application of a historical approach to present conflicts should be considered indispensable. This historical study precludes linguistic competence in Tamil and Sinhala.

3. *Regional Comparison.* The rise of both Hindūtva and Sinhālatva take place in the same region of South Asia. It would be useful to also include other regions, such as Europe during the 1930–40s, where the reversal of values can be studied based on extensive materials.

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