

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

This nation is unique in that it has a written history taking us back in time to over 2500 Years. However, it is a fact that as a nation our people have never learned lessons from history. How can we do so when our own political leaders were responsible for removing history as a subject from education curricula of the nation? Even in countries like America that has a relatively short history, education in this subject is compulsory, because they are well aware that a nation which does not know its history cannot make history and would become extinct. Are we destined for such an eventuality?

King Dharmapala (1550 to 1597 BCE) was a feeble successor to Bhuvanekabahu VII. To maintain himself as king with Portuguese assistance he even became a Christian around 1557 at the instigation of the Portuguese. The people therefore considered him to be a traitor and a puppet king who had betrayed Sinhala Buddhist traditions of the nation. On his death he left his kingdom to the Portuguese crown, thus allowing a western nation to stake a legitimate claim to part of this country for the first time. This perhaps is the first mistake recorded in history that a Sinhala king made after befriending a western power, which affected the sovereignty of our nation.

The subsequent result of his actions was the Portuguese occupation of the Maritime Provinces. This brought nothing but ruin and disaster to our people. The people therefore organized resistance to the hated foreigner under the leadership of kings in Sitawaka, Mayadunne (1521 to 1581 BCE) and his son Rajasingha I (1581 to 1593 BCE) and then under kings in Kandy, VimalaDharma Suriya (1592 to 1604 BCE), Senaratana (1604 to 1653 BCE) and lastly Rajasiha II (1635 to 1687 BCE). It was on the 28th of March 1638 that the last great battle took place at the mountain fortress of Gannoruwa, where the Sinhalese army achieved a glorious victory and the Portuguese army was totally destroyed never again to menace this land, until their final expulsion in 1658.

For this final expulsion of the Portuguese from our country, King Rajasiha II invited Dutch to assist him. This second western power the Dutch who were considered as our friends soon became our enemies when they with their Maritime power commence to strangle the Kandyan kingdom economically. Sinhalese army was now compelled to fight the Dutch for a long period in an effort to drive them out of our native soil.

The king of Kandy Kittsirirajasiha (1747 to 1782 BCE) perhaps made the second mistake when he signed the Sinhala Dutch Treaty on 14th February 1766 consequent to the war with the Dutch. As a result of this Treaty the Sinhalese lost their littoral in the North West as well as in the North East, East and South to the Dutch with all their ports. More over all the sea board round the island not held by the Dutch East India Company before the war was give to the Company to wit, to a distance inland of one Sinhala gawwa, which amounts to about four miles. The Dutch however notwithstanding this agreement encroached on entire Sinhala districts beyond one gawwa from the coast. The mounting opposition from the Kandyan kingdom as a result and the fall of all Dutch settlements except for Negambo, Galle and Colombo to the British by conquest, made the Dutch Governor to surrender all Dutch territories in the island to the British in 1796.

However it was only under the terms of the Peace of Amiens in 1802 that the Maritime Provinces of this country finally became a Crown colony of the British Empire. The Kandyan Kingdom that was never conquered by the Dutch Imperialists remained free but was by then greatly weakened after its long drawn out resistance to the Dutch. The British who helped the king of Kandy to drive away the Dutch from this island next became the enemy of the Kandyan Kingdom with their imperialistic aims, after they came into possession of the Dutch territories in this country.

In 1803 the British sent an expedition to conquer the Kandyan Kingdom. The king of Kandy evacuated the capital and the British were able to occupy it. The king together with his Sinhalese army led by his chieftains was able to subsequently annihilate virtually the whole of the British expeditionary force and regain control of Kandy. It took twelve long years of prolonged struggle from 1803 to 1815, which involved much intrigue and treachery to annex the Kandyan Kingdom as a part of His Majesty's British Empire.

The Kandyan Chieftains finally ceded their Kingdom to the British through the Kandyan Convention signed on 2nd March 1815. The name of the ceded country mentioned throughout the Sinhala text of this International Treaty is called Sinhala, the name by which the island was known through the centuries. The signing of the Kandyan Convention is perhaps the third mistake that was made by our own Chieftains. The letter and spirit of the Convention was never observed by the British Colonial administration. This resulted in two rebellions. One was in 1818 and the other was in 1848. British were able to crush both these rebellions in the most ruthless manner. What conspired is best explained in the words of an English Doctor serving in the British Army, Dr. John Davy in his writings, 'An Account of the Interior of Ceylon 1803,' reprint pp 245-247.

“When a district rose in rebellion, one or more military posts were established in it; martial law was proclaimed; the dwellings of resisting inhabitants were burnt; their fruit trees were often cut down, and the country was scoured in all directions by small detachments, who were authorized to put to death all who made opposition, or were found with arms in their hands....When one considers this rebellion and its consequences, one almost regrets that we ever entered the Kandyan country”

The British colonial rule came to an end with the granting of independence to Ceylon on 4th February 1948. The fourth mistake was made perhaps in the very independence declaration, whereby independence was granted by the British to a country called Ceylon and not to the country called Sinhala that was ceded to them by the Sinhala Chieftains, through the Kandyan Convention. The implication of this intentional or unintentional omission was overlooked by our national leaders at that point of time. Had independence been granted to the nation of Sinhala that was ceded to the British, then there would never have been any ambiguity with regard to the rightful ownership of this island. Just as much as France is the land of its indigenous people the French, Germany is the land of its indigenous people the Germans, China is the land of its indigenous people the Chinese, Japan is the land of its indigenous people the Japanese and so on and so forth, Sinhala would have been the land of its indigenous people the Sinhalese. There would never have been any room for a mythical Tamil homeland in this country.

The fifth in the chain of mistakes was perhaps made when on the 22nd of February 2002 the then treacherous Prime Minister of this country, who had no executive powers, signed a clandestine Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) with the LTTE. This enabled the LTTE among other things to state that this agreement has recognized Tamil Eelam's de facto existence, with its unique characteristics; a distinct population; a government comprising a defence force; a police force, a judiciary, a civil administration and other institutions for effective governance of a people, and capability of entering into agreements with other governments with a line of control reflecting the ground reality of the existence of the Tamil homeland demarcated with recognized borders. The LTTE further states that the CFA recognized the balance of power between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE and was premised on this balance of power.

Election manifestos take an important place in a democratic country such as ours. It is based on these manifestos that the people decide on which political party should form a government or which candidate should become the President. The people voted for Mahinda Rajapakse and made him the present President based on his election manifesto, which is known as the Mahinda Chintana. In this manifesto I believe the preservation of the unitary state, the abrogation of the CFA and sending back the biased Norwegian peace facilitators are all mentioned.

Were these just promises that are made never to be honored? There were many such false promises in the past. One political leader of our country made a promise to make the Sinhala language the official language of this country in 24 hours. Another promised to bring rice even from the moon and feed the people, without increasing prices. Then there was another political leader who promised a just and righteous society. The people trusted these political leaders and brought them to power but the promises never materialized. It is indeed sad that people of this country never learn lessons from history.

This reminds me of the final part of an old Rugby song we used to sing at Trinity it says, Working class can lick my arse, I've got the Forman's job at last. A leader of a union will relentlessly fight for the rights of the worker until he is appointed as a Forman. However, when he is appointed as a Forman he gangs up with the management to trample the rights of the very worker for whom he once fought for.

President Mahinda Rajapakse promised to implement the Mahinda Chintana during his election campaign and was voted to power by the people. Has he after becoming the President forgotten all those promises he gave to his people and has he too ganged up with the Norwegians and the International Community to suppress the rights of the majority community of this country? Has he too not learned lessons from history? Only time will tell, whether he too is no different to all those past political leaders we had who took the people for a ride. If so, he too like his predecessors will no doubt get the order of the boot from the people of this country at the next election.

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