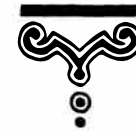


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IN BETWEEN MY two trips to Batti, I headed up-country from Colombo to Kandy on New Year's Eve. The government had just finished building a Golden Canopy over the sacred Temple of the Tooth and was celebrating with a daylong series of dedication ceremonies and processions. Said to be a bicuspid of the Lord Buddha himself, the tooth relic was perhaps the most enduring sign of the continuing role that religion had in legitimizing secular power. According to legend, the relic was spirited out of India by a beautiful princess who had hidden it in her hair when forces hostile to Buddhism tried to crush the religion in the fourth century A.D.

The tooth was considered a symbol of the Buddha's righteousness, and in ancient times the mere possession of it was enough to confer legitimacy on the king. Conversely, without the tooth no king could command a mandate. As a result, it was fought over constantly.

In the Great Rebellion of 1818 against British rule, British capture of the tooth relic was a great victory, signalling that the British were fated to rule Ceylon. While the disestablishment of Buddhism caused the relic to lose its official aura, as Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism mounted, the tooth relic regained its lost force. It was now symbolic of an idea of national sovereignty that was exclusively Sinhalese. "As long as our great shrines such as that of the sacred tooth relic exist on the soil of this island," a leading archconservative

monk wrote in a newspaper column, "it will remain a Sinhala Buddhist country. The presence of non-Sinhala and non-Buddhist minorities will in no way make it a multinational, multireligious country."

Since the great Sinhalese political and cultural resurgence of 1956, the veneration of the sacred tooth relic had become a virtual state cult, with the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy taking on a significance akin to Rome's St. Peter's Basilica or Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock. The government spent great amounts of money on the temple itself and also on the annual ritual called the Kandy Perahera. Once a year, during the full moon of July, a cask containing the tooth relic was paraded around the sacred Kandy Lake in a procession of thousands of dancers and grandly caparisoned elephants.

Rituals connected with the tooth were a way for the government to fulfill its mandate to preserve and protect Buddhism. But the procession this New Year's Eve was also an opportunity for rebel groups, particularly the JVP, to contest that mandate.

Despite the certainty that the JVP would try to attack or disrupt Kandy during the ceremonies, people from all over the country were flocking there to witness the unveiling of the temple's new roof. As a result, train service was miserable. The train I got made all local stops.

The trip was also unpleasant for the unmistakable impression I was getting from the other passengers that I was an unwelcome outlander, "thuppai" to the max. It was interesting after spending time with Tamils in Batti to compare them with the Sinhalese, who seemed more suspicious, insular, and racially prejudiced than ever. The Tamils, however long they had been living in the chaos and uncertainty of war zones, had a lot more warmth and generosity.

Although I had arrived later than I wanted to, the ceremony had yet to start. I amused myself looking at the elephants that were being led through town. They were strolling, chewing a few clumps of grass and branches from trees as they lumbered past. Later that night, there was to be a Perahera, which would transform the elephants into creatures from another world, bedecked with lights and the finest silk brocade. While this mini-Perahera would not be as

awesome as the annual ten-day extravaganza in July, it would still be impressive.

Security seemed curiously light in town. It would have been simple for the JVP to have planted a bomb in the temple amidst the last-minute rush there to complete the Golden Canopy. In the distance, beyond the massive throngs, the new canopy was visible, wrapped in crimson-colored ceremonial bunting, which would be removed after the afternoon's ceremonies. Adding to the sense of pageantry were lines of monks marching into the area from their monasteries around the lake, columns of saffron emerging out of cool green shadow. Depending on their caste, some monks carried umbrellas to ward off the sun, while others bore wide ola-leaf fans.

At just about noon, the crowd surged to welcome the Prime Minister, Ranasinghe Premadasa, the master of ceremonies, who bowed low from the waist and gave the Buddhist high sign. The Golden Canopy was his project, conceived of as part of his Million Houses Building Project, one of the government's most ambitious social welfare programs. It was considered of the greatest merit that a "house" for the Buddha's tooth relic was constructed as part of the program, which put the Prime Minister in a position to gain a great amount of popular Sinhalese support.

Into the empty, cerulean sky, the Prime Minister raised the Buddhist flag on the temple's flagpole outside. At no point was the Sri Lankan national flag, with symbols of the Tamil and Muslim minorities, run up beside it. As the flag went up, people in the crowd were wearing the most rapt expressions, transported by the rite. They broke into a solemn chorus—"Sadhu! Sadhu!"—over and over.

The Prime Minister led a procession of dignitaries along the walkway approaching the temple. Lining the route were men dressed as ceremonial guards. They bore long wooden pikes tipped with polished brass tridents. Among them were musicians, who blew on long curved horns or ceremonial conch shells. Others beat drums. Also in the procession were traditional Kandyan dervish dancers, their white sarongs pleated in a feminine fashion, with breastplates and hats made of jingling shells and pieces of polished silver that shivered when they twirled and jumped.

The temple resembled a fortress. It was hard to muscle into the

more interior precincts of the temple, which were stifling from all the people who were packed inside to see the rituals dedicating the canopy.

A crowd of dignitaries stood in front of the tooth relic room in the middle of the temple. The crowded galleries around them continued the mantric chant of "Sadhu! Sadhu!" Although many scholars have scoffed at the notion that the relic in question was indeed the tooth of the Buddha—Leonard Woolf, who claimed to have seen it, said it looked more like a dog's tooth than a human's—whatever was in there possessed an extraordinary holy force for those who believed.

The relic room was a wooden structure, like a little chapel, with huge ivory tusks flanking its doorway. On an earlier trip several months before, I had been able to get close enough to look inside, where I saw a cluster of monks sitting around what I took to be the cask containing the tooth. Due to the crowded conditions, I was unable to get close this time. Instead, I stood on a small flight of steps in the back of the chamber, just able to see the dignitaries pass a line of monks in front of the relic room.

There was a lot of confusion in the chamber, no clear sense of what was going on or who was doing what. The ritual, it seemed, was taking place on its own, through the people performing and witnessing it, as if it were a living entity. The first part, called a *puja*, involved veneration of the tooth and was performed to demonstrate a commitment to protect it. The second part of the rite, called a *dana*, involved a ceremonial feeding of the monks to show official support for the members of the sangha and deference to the role they played in society.

Later that afternoon there was an impressive moment when the bunting covering the Golden Canopy was removed. As the cover blew off into the wind, the Golden Canopy itself was left gleaming in the afternoon sunlight. At that, a loud, profoundly resonant cheer went up again, before the crowd filed out of the temple to an open-air hallway next door. There, a long afternoon session began, with one of the country's most senior monks giving a convocation address, flanked by men dressed as warriors who blew martial-style horns.

In traditional Sinhalese society, royal patronage for rituals like the ones at the Temple of the Tooth that day was only part of the king's claim to legitimacy. According to the Sinhalese version of classical Theravada Buddhism, the individual quest for spiritual perfection was only possible in a state actively devoted to Buddhist ideals. Therefore the king was also expected to exemplify personally Buddhist morality and values as if he himself was a bodhisattva, or Buddha-in-progress. Another obligation was to provide for the general social welfare of his subjects through large-scale public works, like the ancient irrigation system of the Golden Age, so that their spiritual development would not be hindered by a lack of prosperity. Most importantly, the king was expected to show respect and deference for the members of the sangha and to heed their advice, an obligation that made it difficult to wield royal power arbitrarily.

Although many Colombo analysts balked at suggestions that provisions in the 1978 constitution to "protect and foster the Buddha *sasana*" made Buddhism the state religion of Sri Lanka, many of the classical expectations of Buddhist kingship had been tacitly absorbed into the country's supposedly secular political culture. As a result, the President's political legitimacy rested upon fulfilling many of the same responsibilities as those of ancient Sinhalese kings, intertwining the country's modern democratic expectations with religious precepts of the past.

The government in power under J.R. had demonstrated its commitment to Buddhism in the form of lavish patronage to Buddhist temples and shrines. Nevertheless, there was a deepening popular impression that it had failed to live up to its constitutional obligations to preserve the Buddha *sasana*. The signing of the Accord strengthened this impression. Maintaining the *sasana* entailed a lot more than building shrines, explained one highly respected Buddhist layman, who was also a critic of the ruling UNP. "This government has done everything it can to destroy the Buddha *sasana* in this country," he insisted. "And the people know it. It is rotten to the core."

The case against the government contained a number of charges. First was its failure to maintain basic security for the Sinhalese, especially those in the north and east. The government's dereliction of duty on this count also extended to its failure to protect Buddhist shrines, which were in many cases desecrated by Tamil rebels. There was also considerable dissatisfaction tied to the spreading lawlessness in the south. Though the JVP was largely responsible for the chaos, the government was unable to stop it.

Another violation of the *sasana* involved the socioeconomic conditions government policies encouraged. Instead of providing for general prosperity and social justice, the UNP regime had promoted gross economic disparity, institutional corruption, and "false" materialistic values akin to those of the old Anglicized elite that were at odds with Buddhist expectations. Signs of these false values were everywhere—in the kind of sex- and violence-ridden movies that were shown in Colombo, in the egregious greed and corruption of "baby farms" run by illegal international adoption rackets that were winked at by government officials, and in the policies that encouraged gambling and the consumption of alcohol while turning a blind eye toward petty exploitation in the form of food adulteration and usury.

Most of the responsibility for these perceived violations of the *sasana* was laid at the feet of J. R. Jayawardene. Although he had tried to portray himself as a pious Buddhist, his critics said he was concerned with the building of shrines at the expense of the substance. He reveled in his Westernized orientation, his reading of *The Times* of London, his status as an alumnus of the Royal College. "What good is culture?" he had once asked an audience at a literary awards ceremony. "Can you eat it? Can it get you a telephone or a car?"

Furthermore, Jayawardene made intemperate remarks about the JVP, using terms usually reserved for animals. "They are not animals," chided one monk. "They are human beings. We should teach them to be better." That J.R. had also issued death threats against the JVP was considered particularly offensive. "Where has a political leader in the world ever publicly given people a license to

kill as he did in that speech?" asked a prominent Sinhalese attorney. "The speech was shocking." Added another lawyer: "Would you expect a respectable head of state to summon his security forces and his own private forces and say, 'They are animals, brutes—go kill them and if you're in trouble I will pass legislation in Parliament absolving you for what you've done'? It is unheard of—here or anywhere else."

Jayawardene's worst lapse in terms of his obligations toward the *sasana*, however, involved his running feud with the monks. Even before the war flared in the mid-eighties, the sangha was complaining that it had grown isolated from the mainstream of the country's political life once again. Once war broke out they grew even testier, deeply resentful that Jayawardene appeared deaf to their counsel on dealing with the Tamils.

Antipathy between Jayawardene and the monks came to a head after the signing of the peace accord. In a bid to discipline the monks for rioting after the Accord, the government withdrew the subsidies used to pay salaries for monks teaching in Buddhist schools and passed legislation requiring them to possess identity cards. It also began arresting and detaining many of them, which violated deep-seated taboos against using violence against the clergy.

As doubts about its legitimacy began to harden, the government initiated a very subtle effort to retrieve its mandate from the public. The rhetoric of government ministers as well as the President began to brim over with self-conscious allusions to Lanka's glorious Buddhist past. The government also announced jobs and housing programs, scholarship funds for poor rural students, and school lunch programs, all of which were designed to fulfill expectations of long-standing traditions of state welfarism and royal largesse.

But the most self-conscious bid to create the impression of government fidelity came in the form of government patronage to the sangha—lavish gifts to influential monks and generous outlays for building and refurbishing shrines. Whether the politics of placation would work was another question. Symbolic displays of support for Buddhism like the Golden Canopy and the festivities accompanying it helped the government restore some of its lost luster. But the

more substantive complaints against the regime were harder to beat back.

To mark the importance of the dedication of the Golden Canopy, the ritual procession known as the Perahera was scheduled for later that evening. The Perahera was the most vital manifestation of the link between politics and religion. In it, a people divided by caste came together in ritual harmony to enact a pageant that stood at the heart of their shared sense of sacred mission. The Perahera, in essence, was a microcosm of the entire society, and even provided a place for certain castes of Tamils who were acknowledged as a valued constellation within the wider galaxy of the Sinhala Buddhist kingdom.

In the days of the Kandyan kings, the Perahera also played an important political role as well, providing an opportunity for the king to meet his chiefs and appointees from scattered points around the island. Back then, between preparations for the festival and the festival itself, the king would have his chiefs in town for up to a month. During this period, differences over important political issues were bridged and alliances crafted, leading to harmony in the land. If the king's powers of persuasion didn't hammer out consensus among his chiefs, another dividend of the Perahera was that it allowed him to exhibit his warriors and weapons.

As darkness fell, Kandy began to look festive. The town was bedecked by garlands of electric lights and Buddha statues in gaudy shades. The Temple of the Tooth was illuminated by powerful spotlights, in contrast to the inky stillness of the lake and the moody hills surrounding the town. Crowds assembled in anticipation of the procession, and late-arriving elephants, their trunks curled around grass and leaves, were routed through town by their mahouts.

But the anticipatory air had an undercurrent of tension. Last year's Perahera had been truncated by the first wave of violence protesting the peace accord, and there was fear that this night's mini-procession might suffer a similar fate. Although the JVP had made no statement about the event, I had heard stories that they looked disparagingly upon the dedication of the Golden Canopy as

a thinly disguised bid to manipulate popular emotions. Attacking the Perahera might be bad karma for the JVP, but it would be effective strategy.

The JVP had ample opportunities to disrupt the procession, since it was hard to make the city of Kandy totally secure. Although Kandy had been spared the violence afflicting the rest of the south, the JVP looked like it was about to bring Kandy into the fray, expanding its operations there.

Many of the Western reporters in Colombo at that time had dismissed the Perahera as a quaint local custom with little importance for the country's political situation. My friend Stephen and I therefore attracted a fair bit of attention, not all of it good. At one point, a policeman motioned me out of the street, and, unsatisfied by my haste, he overreacted and grabbed me by the hand in an extremely painful way.

We also ran into a lot of resentment in the Muslim café where we ate. At the counter, Stephen got into an altercation with a drunk who exhibited nationalist proclivities, after a fairly even-tempered political discussion about the Prime Minister's chances in the next election. "Don't you dare call him Premadasa," the man shouted. "Show some respect. Call him Prime Minister Premadasa."

Thongs packed the procession route. Many more were perched in the windows along the way. The sheer number of people jammed into town would make any rebel activity very messy. "Have no worry," said a constable assigned to crowd control. "The situation is normal. There is nothing to worry about. We are always here to help you. These terrorist fellows are only in the south. Nothing to worry about."

"Yes," Stephen replied facetiously. "They probably all went away on holiday, correct?"

The constable guffawed at the thought, his reaction very much out of proportion. "Correct. Correct. Holiday. That's a good one."

He told us that there were at least 2,000 police commandos in town, which looked about right. Some were on foot, others on bicycles or on horseback. Pushing and surging, the crowd seemed like

it would be hard to contain, but when a group of masked men wearing ceremonial garb came up the street, slashing the air with broadswords and cracking whips, the crowd fell perfectly silent and still. The Perahera had begun.

After the swordsmen came the fire jugglers, some with long batons lit at either end, others twirling pinwheel-like contraptions that created freestanding circles of fire. Soon the whole street was lit up by flames. Posted ten feet apart, a line of pickets had materialized on each side of the parade, holding long staves cocked at sixty-degree angles with buckets of burning pitch at the end. They strained to avoid being burned by the flames that leapt back at them as the wind shifted.

The main procession consisted of groups of dancers, each representing a different caste or regional group. One unit of teenaged boys carried small brooms, another carried broadswords gleaming in the firelight. A contingent of older men, a hundred or more, carried the blue, orange, white, red, and yellow Buddhist colors. Other dancing troupes moved through the streets in paroxysms and fugues, gyrations and shivers, as cymbals clashed and drums beat insistently. Jugglers, acrobats, and magicians rounded out the parade.

Between each contingent were grandly decorated elephants in capes of crimson, maroon, orange, and black that were studded with blinking electric lights. Accompanied by a mahout and ridden by men who wore the historical garb of ancient Kandyan chiefs, the first few elephants marched in single file, but as the parade progressed, they marched two, three, and even four abreast. Around their feet were chains.

The Perahera was by far the most intensely authentic and alien thing I saw in my time in Sri Lanka. Often the Sinhalese seemed to suffer from cultural deracination, or from an overcompensating tendency to make culture a fetish object. But here the Sinhalese were more substantial and more natural than I had ever seen them. This piece of sacred traditional culture invigorated them with the strength of identity. It was an utterly transportive experience.

This feeling, however, did not come without a sense of estrange-

ment for me. I could see how the first Englishmen to have seen the Perahera must have thought they were witnessing something from the bowels of a pagan hell. It was a fiery hallucination of voodoo intensity that would give any Westerner pause.

As the last elephant passed, the crowd began to surge and swell a little bit. Physically, the sensation was like wind filling out a sail, but there was something baleful about it. The crowd dynamic had an intensity that I normally associated with India, where people are routinely crushed to death at festivals. Across the street, a whole tier of people standing on the steps lining the route fell off into the road, prompting police attention.

I assumed that there was a robbery or some youthful unruliness. Back at my hotel, however, the clerk told me that a number of bombs had exploded at the tail end of the parade, perhaps the first salvo in a JVP assault, or a lure to draw a police response for an ambush.

I hurried back outside. The smells of gunpowder and burned human flesh hanging in the streets were unmistakable, but it was unclear what kind of bomb had gone off. As I tried to follow a group of police commandos, I was stopped by an officer, his pistol drawn. He told me that I could not go any further—it was a restricted area. Other pedestrians were also stopped and searched. The bomb, it seemed, had blown up not three blocks from the reviewing stand, along a side street that was part of the parade route.

I managed to get past the police. Not fifty feet from where the blast occurred, about a hundred police officers were assembled in riot gear. It wasn't a terribly big bomb by Sri Lankan standards, but it had done a fair bit of damage. There were unconfirmed reports of five or six killed and eleven injured. Luckily, the tail end of the parade had moved faster than usual. Those still marching, the trustees of the temple and the custodian bringing up the rear, had passed the site of the explosion just a few minutes before the bomb went off.

I headed back to the hotel to see if I could get a phone line and make a report, but just as I got out of the cordoned-off area, there was another explosion and then a third. Two more bombs in almost the exact same spot as the first. Luckily, no one was hurt, not even

the explosive-sniffing dog that had its snout in a pile of garbage and debris about ten feet away.

Back at the hotel, I found the Minister of Justice, an aristocratic Sinhalese whose family had long connections to the Temple of the Tooth. His father had been a compatriot of Dharmapala; his son was the custodian of the temple and he, although a stalwart of the UNP and a supporter of the peace accord, was quite revered by Buddhist laymen. "I wish I was an astrologer," he replied when I asked who he thought had set off the bombs and why. "Maybe then I could answer your question."

He was heading down to the hospital soon to check into the casualties, and he invited me along so I could get the facts right, since exaggerated reports would make the government look shakier than it already looked.

The hospital was more crowded than the initial casualty reports would have suggested. Patients were sitting on benches in the corridors to make room for the more seriously injured. A deputy police inspector on the scene gave us the official version: four dead and eighteen critically injured. "Happy New Year, sir," another police inspector said sarcastically to the minister as we were leaving the hospital ground. "Yes," said the minister, copying the tone. "Happy New Year to you, too."

The attack was clearly incoherent, the minister said, applying his spin as we drove through the dark streets. It showed there was serious dislocation in their movement. If not, they wouldn't be targeting innocent civilians to make themselves appear strong and unstoppable.

But the minister wasn't very convincing. Kandy had been ringed with security officers and crawling with undercover agents on the lookout for suspicious parcels. Nevertheless, someone had gotten through with not one but three separate bombs. "We were lucky," the minister admitted, letting his relief show through his otherwise casual air. "It would have been too horrific to consider, because if the bombs had gone off with the elephants still around, it might have started a stampede."