

Under-development and Superstitious Beliefs

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Abraham Kovoor, President of the Rationalist Association of Sri Lanka is virtually a household-word today. He has made numerous challenges (with attractive prizes thrown in) in Sri Lanka and the neighbouring countries to practitioners of the occult, ESP etc., to prove their claims. His rationalist claims have stood these fundamental tests and no one has seriously taken up his challenges. In the cover-story of our May 1976 issue, which dealt with "The New Face of Education", a writer who argued that superstition was one of the major social factors impeding our educational reforms stated:

"The education reforms have the development of a scientific attitude and providing the ability to use the scientific method in solving problems among its objectives. Superstition provides a formidable obstacle in achieving them. The large amount of advertising space in newspapers bought by purveyors of charms and potions guaranteed to ensure success at examinations is only an index to the extent to which superstition has a hold on our people.

This social factor, according to Dr. Kovoor, can be an impediment not only to educational reforms but to the entire process of development. In this article he discusses the significance of superstition to development.

Lord Fenner Brockway (then Mr. Brockway) the Labour M.P. of Great Britain, and myself, President of the Rationalist Association of Ceylon, were among the guest speakers at the triennial conference of the "World Union of Freethinkers" held in 1961 at Surrey, England. During his address Lord Brockway said the "materialistic" people of the developed countries in the West should put a stop to the "undesirable" prac-

tice of giving economic aid to the "spiritualistic" people in the so-called developing countries in the East.

I, the only Asiatic present at this August gathering, was rudely shocked and thoroughly disappointed to hear such a statement from a Labour M.P. of the United Kingdom, and of all people Lord Fenner Brockway who had been all along championing the cause of the subject peoples of British colonies. I had already formed a favourable impression about him because of his speeches in the House of Commons defending the freedom fighters of India and Ceylon.

Answering a question from me as to why he objected to the prosperous countries of the West giving help to the poorer countries of the East like the one from where I came, Fenner Brockway said:—

"It is true that comparatively we are richer than most of the countries of the East. We prosper because we work hard depending on the fruits of science and technology without seeking the assistance of imaginary gods to better our life here and now. Your people, on the otherhand, waste their time and energy to placate imaginary gods to better their lives after death! Do you want us to give you a share of the products of our hard labour to enable you to waste more time on prayers, meditation, poojas and pilgrimages? Have you any idea of the number of man-hours

lost each year by able-bodied men and women of your countries wasting time during working hours for their spiritual exercises? While bells are rung at our work places to enable the workers to rest and refresh themselves to do more and efficient work, bells are rung several times during working time in certain Middle-East countries to enable the workers to conduct their prayers for ensuring a better life after their death? Why do you expect help from us when you can get all what you need as boons from your gods?"

Realising the truth of what Fenner Brockway said, I had to keep quiet eating humble pie!!

Very seldom do we give serious thought to some of the absurd things we do in anticipation of benefits from non-existing gods.

While sensible persons in the industrial countries of the West consult specialists in scientific disciplines—economists, engineers, technologists etc.—whenever they want to start a new industrial venture, our people in the East, even if they happen to be highly educated, will not attempt any progressive venture without an astrologer showing the green light. Auspicious times, piriths and poojas are more important to our development projects than science and technology.

When there was severe drought in the catchment areas of Mousekelle and Castlereigh reservoirs some months ago a special pooja was conducted at Sri Mahabodhi Vihara at Anuradhapura to invoke the blessings of devas to produce rain. The chief incumbent of Atamasthana who conducted the ceremony said that from the time of King Devanampiyatissa it had been the practice of reigning monarchs to bathe the Sri Mahabodhi with pirith water and pray for rains whenever there had been droughts. "Within two hours of the ceremony the devas answered the prayers with a fairly heavy shower at Anuradhapura", said a newspaper report.

All those persons who were involved in this superstitious cult for producing rain by placating non-existing "devas" were not illiterate aborigines of a primitive era, but educated persons of an "enlightened and civilised" people that live in Sri

Lanka during the third quarter of the twentieth century! It was paradoxical to read in the same newspaper a couple of days later about some of these same persons, who indulged in the rain-making cult at Anuradhapura, taking part and speaking at a seminar on "Water Management and Control". It was rather strange that none of the speakers at this seminar spoke about the easy and cheap method of making rain water available for human use in any place and at any time by prayer.

Thermal Power and Temple Complex

It was reported that, in connection with the 100th birth anniversary of the late Mr. D. J. Wimalasurendra, arrangements were made to lay the foundation stones for the construction of a temple complex on the dam site of the Mousekelle reservoir, and to dedicate them to God Saman, the "guardian deity of the Samanala Adaviya", and invoke his blessings for the "successful completion of projects based on rivers which have their sources in the central massif, the domain of Saman".

Could Mr. Wimalasurendra, the far-sighted engineer, have ever envisaged that several years after his death—in a space age—some people of Sri Lanka would be squandering taxpayers' money to build a temple complex in the hope of obtaining electric power through the blessings of a non-existing legendary god? Are we given foreign exchange, by the World Bank and friendly "materialistic" countries, to build temples for the regional gods of Sri Lanka, or for development projects?

On reading this in the local newspapers, the shocking news about the sacrifice of a 22 year old girl by the *Adivasi* tribes of Madhya Pradesh, India, for ensuring the strength of a river dam under construction, came to my mind. Speaking about this incident in the State Assembly of Madhya Pradesh, the Chief Minister Mr. Sethi said, "This tragic crime resulted from the superstitious belief held by the illiterate and ignorant hill tribes of the area that the guardian deity of their hills could be pleased by the shedding of blood of a virgin on the dam under construction".

All those who were responsible for this gruesome religious ritual are today in Indian jails. It is gratifying that our people in Sri Lanka do not share the belief of the hill tribes of Madhya Pradesh! Our virgins are not in danger of being sacrificed to god Saman!!

While we in Sri Lanka try to make rain by prayers and poojas, let us see what the leaders of our neighbouring country, India, are doing. I quote below a news item from an Indian newspaper:

"The artificial rain-making experiments by seeding the clouds in the catchment areas of the Madras city's water sources, which began last week, will be continued till the end of the month.

"The experts in rain-making will then move on to Coimbatore for similar operations in the hydal areas of the Nilgiris. Till the middle of November they will be shuttling between Madras and Coimbatore, inducing the clouds to shed the rain in these two areas.

"The result of the cloud seeding experiments in Poondi area near Madras for the past one week have been encouraging".

Although the masses in India are as superstitious as those of Sri Lanka, they seem to be more fortunate in that some of their leaders are prepared to discard primitive superstitious beliefs, and march forward towards progress and prosperity using scientific methods.

Again under the caption "Pirith for a Week" the following news appeared in the Ceylon Daily News:—

"A week-long pirith ceremony begins today in the Senate Library to invoke the blessings of the Triple Gem on the country..... Members of the public and many Buddhist organisations have been invited to participate".

Able-bodied men and women all over the country are invited to spend one full week without doing any work. Can we afford to do so because there are "materialistic" people in the West to work hard for us and give us their surplus? How true

Lord Fenner Brockway was when he said that the prosperous nations of the West should put a stop to the practice of giving aid to the so-called developing countries! This is exactly how the priestly class originated. When the primitive man, who lived by eating the flesh of animals he hunted, evolved into a farmer he could produce surplus food. Crafty ones among primitive farmers started to live as parasites on the workers consuming their surplus products on the pretext of possessing miraculous powers to help them to make their "life after death" better!

Man—The Progressive Animal

Although the lower animals have better perceiving powers than men, there is no progress in their mode of life down the ages. This is due to the fact that, unlike men, they have no power of creative thinking. The spider of today makes the same type of web as their ancestors did millions of years ago. The pattern of the mud nest of the potter wasp has not improved since the time of their evolution. The weaver bird and the tailor bird make the same type of nest as their ancestors did ages ago. Even the apes of today lead the same type of life as their forbears did millions of years ago.

On the other hand, man has progressed, and is still progressing by leaps and bounds, from the aboriginal state of their forbears. In his shelter, food, clothing, communication, travel, health, defence, offence, social life, economic security etc., man is progressing day by day.

In his aboriginal state man lived like a savage killing animals and fellow humans with clubs and stones for his food. They ate flesh raw. When he ate the flesh of animals that were killed in forest fires, he found it softer. This led him to the art of cooking. When the flesh of the animals he killed got contaminated with salt, he found it tastier. This led him to add spices to make his food more palatable. He is improving his culinary skill day by day.

By domesticating animals and cultivating edible plants he found that he could get a continuous supply of food, and thus get more leisure to engage in intellectual activities. Today he is improving the quantity and

quality of his food supply using scientific methods of hybridisation and selective breeding. Instead of depending on nature, as animals do, man is interfering with nature to improve his lot. Modern man no more depends entirely on natural rain or rivers, or on prayers and poojas for his water requirements. He uses irrigation engineering, tubewells and artificial rain-making to obtain water whenever and wherever he needs it.

From clubs and stones there is a gradual evolution in man's weapons of offence and defence. Today he has atom bombs, inter-continental ballistic missiles, torpedoes, depth charges, mines, laser beams, asphyxiating and incendiary bombs and chemical and biological weapons.

The primitive man's means of communication was gesticulations and modulations of certain sounds, which in time gave rise to words. As time went on he coined more and more words to improve his vocabulary. He recorded his thoughts, first as drawings on the walls of his cave dwellings, and later on mud cakes. With the development of the art of writing he was able to record his thoughts on stone slabs, copper plates and ola leaves. With the invention of the art of paper-making and printing man was able to record more systematically his thoughts for the benefit of not only his contemporary fellow human beings, but also for many yet to be born. Today, with the help of the radio, T.V., and satellite communication, man is able to communicate with his fellow beings even when they are in outer space or on another planet.

Like the animals from which he evolved, the primitive man's method of locomotion was by using his legs. The evolution of his mode of travel from bullock cart and dug-out canoes to the jet and atomic propulsion is as interesting as the evolution of his medical practices to preserve his health. Primitives believed that diseases were caused either by the anger of imaginary gods and demons or by the possession of "spirits" of dead persons. The technique he adopted for maintaining good health was by pleasing angry gods and demons by giving them bribes, respectably called "offerings" or by

appealing to them through poojas and prayers. Medical practice was in the hands of a set of human parasites known as priests or *kattadijas*. They claimed special powers to mediate between gods and men, or to exorcise non-existing spirits from the bodies of the sick. Although this type of cult is still practised and patronised by ignorant persons, intelligent men of today have improved their medical science by immunisation, antibiotics, organ transplanting, blood transfusion, surgery, anaesthesia, electronic pace-maker etc.

Of all animals on this planet man alone has the capacity to progress, going against the laws of nature or the "plan of the creator", because he alone has the capacity to engage in creative thinking. This is due to the superior quality of his brain.

Creative Thinking

Creative thinking is the ability to think constructively building up new ideas by the process of association of previously acquired ideas. All our progressive ideas, whether by intuition or inspiration, result from such creative thinking. This, of course, is different from the subjective creative thinking resulting from the fantasies of surrealistic visionaries.

Scientists, as a rule, are predominantly objective thinkers because they build up their thoughts on empirical knowledge. On the other hand, philosophers, poets, artists and theologians are mostly subjective thinkers. While the former is a realist, the latter is a fantast.

What makes some people become visionaries and mystics? Biochemists, neurologists and psychologists now know how mental derangements and deceptive perceptions are caused. Deceptive perceptions are caused by illusions and hallucinations. Illusions are wrong perceptions of sensory experiences. Thus, there are five types of illusions. They are optical, auditory, olfactory, lingual and tactile illusions.

Biochemical upsets produced by imbalance of hormones, vitamins and enzymes in the body can cause hallucinations. Hallucinations are common symptoms of vitamin-deficiency diseases like Beri Beri, Pellagra and schizophrenia. Hallucinations of sick people, who are in a delirious

state, are wrongly interpreted by ignorants as the dying persons' ability to see and converse with the "spirits" of dead relations.

Hallucinations

When I went to my ancestral home in Kerala in 1942 just after my mother's death, my attention was drawn by my wife to the daily routine of numerous Christian women from our neighbourhood conducting prayers, with my elder brother's daughter Anne in the centre, in an out-house in our garden. When I asked my brother why these prayers are conducted daily, he told me that after my mother's death, his daughter Anne could see her grandmother being taken to heaven surrounded by numerous angels holding candle-lights whenever she looked upto the sky. The Christian women in the neighbourhood regarded Anne as a blessed girl to have the spiritual power to have the vision of her grandmother, the wife of the late Very Rev. Koorveer Eipe Thomma Kathanar, the Vicar General of the Syrian Mar Thomma Church of Malabar, being taken to heaven by angels.

I warned my brother that if the practice was to continue long, his daughter might end up in a lunatic asylum. Though not a rationalist like me, my brother had high regard for my opinion. He stopped the prayer meetings from that day. I brought Anne with me to Sri Lanka, and subjected her to a thorough medical check up. It was found that her parathyroid glands were not functioning properly. After a week of hormone treatment my mother and angels disappeared from the sky!

Had I not brought Anne with me to Sri Lanka and treated her, she would have had more hallucinations and "visions" according to the delusional beliefs in which she was brought up, and eventually she would have been canonised as St. Anne of Kerala, and there would have been millions to go on pilgrimage to my ancestral home to get her blessings, their problems solved and sickness healed. Today she is a happy grandmother because she was given proper treatment in time!

Hallucinations can also be induced psychologically through hypnotic suggestions. Both autosuggestions and heterosuggestions can induce hypnotic hallucinations. A person

under heterohypnosis will have hallucinations according to the suggestions of the hypnotist. If a Hindu or a Buddhist, who is brought up in the delusional belief in rebirth, is hypnotised and told that he is in his previous life, he will come out with a role-play story of an imaginary previous life. Similarly, if a person who is brought up in the Christian belief of hell and heaven is hypnotised and told that he is in heaven, he will role-play a vivid description of the heaven. It is foolish to establish the truth or reality of a thing from the talk of a person under hypnosis, although such talks are of immense value to a psychiatrist.

Glossolalia

Glossolalia, the neurosis of speaking in tongue, is often seen at Pentecostal congregations, and at exorcistic cults in temples, devals and churches. They speak in fabricated sounds and words believing that a foreign language is being spoken by them.

Once a medical doctor came to me by appointment. During conversation he asked me whether I noticed anything abnormal in him. On being asked why he asked me that question, he told me that after taking his medical degree from Ceylon he went to Mysore to practice under Dr. Rao, a cardiologist of great repute. "While at Mysore I got interested in yoga, and after six months of intensive yoga practice I got the ability to speak in any language", he said. This statement alarmed me. To test his claim I asked him to speak in Arabic. He took a deep breath, and gave a long speech in Arabic. As I did not know Arabic, I asked him to give me the meaning of what he spoke. He gave the meaning in English. I then asked him to give a speech in Hindi. He gave a speech in Hindi too. Although there were two or three Hindi words in his speech, I could not get any meaning out of his "Hindi" speech. Then I asked him to speak in Malayalam. He gave a long speech in Malayalam also, and gave its meaning in English. In his "Malayalam" speech there was not a single word of Malayalam, my own mother tongue!

I had the unpleasant duty of telling him that he was a victim of glossolalia. This neurotic condition developed in him as a result of his delusional belief that by practising yoga

he could develop the miraculous power of speaking in tongues. Dr. F. D. Goodman of Denison University, Ohio, in her research paper on "Glossolalia in Pentecostal Congregations" says that the participants get into a temporary insane state of mind—a glossolalia bout—as a result of their blind belief that they could get possessed by the "Holy Ghost" by chanting the refrain "Praise the Lord" several times.

Meditation and chanting of 'sacred' mantras are slow processes of autohypnosis. A lot of nonsense is spoken and believed about this primitive cult of inducing hallucinations. Numerous able-bodied men and women in the "spiritualistic" East waste their time in yogic asanas and at meditation centres in the hope of attaining "enlightenment", experiencing "heavenly bliss", "spiritual liberation", "self-realisation", "god realisation", "state of awareness" etc.

Transcendental Meditation

In recent years a new type of meditation known as Transcendental Meditation (TM), propagated by one of the numerous "godmen" of India, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, has gained favour with a large number of gullibles, specially among the drug-addict escapists in Western countries.

It was deplorable that a scientific body like the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science, of which I am ashamed to be a member, descended to the level of the credulous devotees of Mahesh Yogi, one of the numerous unemployed and unemployable graduates of India who have found it profitable to go to the Western countries in the garb of "gurus" for amassing wealth from the rich gullibles through false propaganda by profit-sharing collusive agents, to sponsor a lecture by him on his fad "Transcendental Meditation and creative thinking".

Apart from the fact that yoga is a form of good physical exercise there is absolutely nothing miraculous about it. The tall claims of Hatha yogis, Raja yogis, Gnana yogis and Kundalini yogis that yogis over 300 years of age live in the Himalayas, they can eat glass and nails, drink poison, levitate in the air, leave their bodies and materialise in another, stop the heart-beat and breathing, walk on water,

(To be concluded)