

Portuguese Expansion - Prime Motives

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In Sri Lanka, the Portuguese strategy evolved over the years. At first the motive may have been innocuously commercial and it can be argued with some factual backing that the marauding Arabs were held back by the advent of European imperial power in South Asia. The Sinhala nation was in an enfeebled and spiritless state and the cruel and crafty Portuguese quickly realized that there was territory for the taking with little expenditure of manpower. It is good to recall at this point that the 16th and subsequent centuries (we are speaking of the European nations) were marked by unparalleled brutality – both secular and ecclesiastical. Killing of opponents was a trifling matter. Killing the heathen was regarded as a religious duty in an age when human beings had no rights if they refused to conform.

In such an age, the Portuguese held the first place in the league table for cruelty and it is our historic misfortune that they crossed our shores at a time of declining fortunes for the people of this ancient land. They had a reputation for the sadistic delight they took in torturing their victims – both human and animal. They – like their compatriots in the West – were experts in perfidy, double-dealing and lying when negotiating with weak native rulers. Is it a great surprise when it turned out that the ‘traders and friends’ were really loathsome killers of our people and exterminators of our civilization? That the Portuguese should never be pardoned for the ravaging of our towns, the destruction of our temples, the brutal conversion of an unsophisticated citizenry and the heartless massacre of innocents in the name of a God and Sovereign that the people of this Island had neither heard of or cared for is unarguable.

However, the blame must be rightly apportioned. The lack of a fighting spirit among the Sinhala people, the adulation of the Fair-Skinned European, the infighting and unprincipled clinging to power of those who called themselves the leaders of the Sinhala nation and the gross neglect of the rights of the ordinary people made Sri Lanka a weak and vacillant nation-state at the mercy of ruthless predators. Isolated acts of heroism have little meaning when cowardice and pacifism are the reigning motifs in an economically weak and forlorn land – a land then and now without friends. The Portuguese battered on the door when the ancient religion (Buddhism) was at a low ebb and it is a mere freak of history that we escaped the bleak stranglehold of Catholicism.

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