



Summary of Olcott Memorial Oration 2010 by Ravinatha Aryasinha

Ambassador Aryasinha says time ripe “for West to re-think its strategies and engage Sri Lanka in a more respectful and constructive manner”

Sri Lanka’s Ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg and the EU, Ravinatha Aryasinha has said, “notwithstanding some governments as well as regional and international organizations succumbing to demands from NGOs and the pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora to continue a policy of keeping pressure on Sri Lanka, an emerging trend is discernible, that others are gradually re-thinking their strategy, and in fact working hard to build bridges with Sri Lanka, both in terms of economic, as well as security cooperation. An important factor that is probably weighing on the minds of those policy makers in western capitals, is that by over playing their hand to appease these interests for electoral and other considerations, they are not only losing whatever leverage they had with the GOSL on the very issues they claim to be concerned about, but also stand to lose out on benefitting from the development trajectory Sri Lanka is poised to take in the future.” He added that “One could expect that this realization will soon lead to an overall re-calibration by the West of its strategy and tactics adopted concerning relations with Sri Lanka” and noted that “the forthcoming commencement of the 2nd term of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, whose party also commands a near 2/3rds majority in Parliament, would be an appropriate moment for the West to re-think its strategy, and engage Sri Lanka in a more respectful and constructive manner.”

Ambassador Aryasinha made these observations, when he spoke on the theme, ‘Moderating competing narratives: the challenge of recasting Sri Lanka’s image abroad’, in delivering the Olcott Oration 2010 at Ananda College in Colombo, on Saturday (6 November 2010). The President of the Ananda College Old Boys’ Association Thilak Karunaratne presided over the event. Mr. L.M.D. Dharmasena, Principal of Ananda College, members of the Ananda College Old Boys’ Association, present and past teachers and students, senior government officials, media personalities and other well wishers were associated at this event

Starting from the premise that “despite the significant improvement in the ‘reality’ in post-conflict Sri Lanka, there has not been a commensurate improvement in Sri Lanka’s image abroad”, Ambassador Aryasinha identified Western Governments, Non Governmental Organizations, Sri Lankans Abroad, foreigners visiting and doing business with Sri Lanka, and the international media, as constituencies that shape Sri Lanka’s image abroad. Having discussed their possible motivations, he went on to offer some thoughts as to how Sri Lanka might engage these constituencies in a meaningful manner.

On **Western Governments**, he said “ While we cannot assuage the imaginary fears of some, all Sri Lanka, like any other self -respecting country can do, is to go the extra mile to address their concerns when they are even marginally genuine, and to respectfully indicate to these parties why some of their demands are misguided and unrealistic and is not in the national interest. Sri Lanka must also remain ready to continue to engage with these parties as long as it could, but it is under no pressure today to capitulate to unreasonable demands”.

On **NGOs**, he said “It may be difficult for these organizations to accept that the situation has changed and that their roles too must necessarily change” and that “either their inability or refusal to accept this stark reality, has presently led to misunderstandings and disagreements



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between NGOs and the GOSL”. He called for “greater differentiation between NGOs on the part of GOSL, as well as better coordination between the government authorities and NGOs operating within Sri Lanka. Additionally, screening of NGOs to ascertain whether the organization as well as its staff are qualified and experienced enough to engage in the work they wish to undertake, and greater accountability on the part of NGOs themselves, can help improve the relationship”.

On the Sri Lankan Diaspora he said “it is abundantly clear that today, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is no monolith”, and that “the Government has already shown itself to be adept at differentiating between these categories. There are no holds barred in going after those within the diaspora, whose actions are bound to seek to perpetuate terrorism in whatever guise – and the success of these efforts is evident. At the same time, GOSL has made it clear that it does not intend to demonize or even isolate the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, and has also shown keenness to engage in a dialogue with them in the changed atmosphere, with a view to harness their talents and resources towards the betterment of Sri Lanka”. He added, “Western governments will soon have to come to a conclusion as to “who speaks for the Tamils of Sri Lanka”- whether it is those in the diaspora who are unrepentant, militant and continue to seek an independent ‘Tamil Eelam’, or whether it should be those peace loving Tamils living both in Sri Lanka as well as abroad, who are ready to move on with other communities that share this country in solidarity”. He also pointed out that “even though military victory has been achieved over the LTTE, it is important that the broader Sri Lankan diaspora community, cutting across ethnic, linguistic and religious lines, who internationally played a valiant role complementing GOSL efforts in countering LTTE propaganda in the past years, should not yet consider that the war is over. They must understand that the battle for Sri Lanka’s image abroad has in fact intensified. It is today being played out in a theatre, in which, if united, they can play an even more effective role, in projecting the better qualities of Sri Lanka to the world. In doing so, unlike in the past, today there is the advantage of having worthy interlocutors to engage abroad, with Tamil diaspora groups previously estranged with the Sri Lankan state, increasingly visiting the country to assess the ground situation and decide how best they could be party to the reconciliation and development process.

On Foreigners visiting and doing business with Sri Lanka, he said, “Even as we tirelessly work to bring investment, promote tourism and open up new markets for Sri Lanka, we should engage in these activities in a manner that also secures Sri Lanka advocates, who could be converted into a robust and independent counterpoint to those vested interests that continue to vilify Sri Lanka. To this end there is a need for greater public-private sector collaboration not only for rapid economic development in Sri Lanka, but also for using those engaging in these sectors in a strategic partnership. This task must also be complemented by Sri Lankans who travel abroad and interact with external audiences in their day-to-day lives; as businessmen, students, tourists, as well as in chat rooms. They can all serve as communicators of the change that is taking place in Sri Lanka, and re-inforce a positive impression about the country abroad. We must create the buzz that Sri Lanka needs at this point, if we are to counter the negative



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stories that continue to dominate the international projection of Sri Lanka”. He said “the forthcoming Cricket World Cup in the sub-continent and the tremendous attention it will focus on Sri Lanka, should be used to Sri Lanka’s advantage to regain dominance of the narrative on Sri Lanka. Judging from how they have been playing in recent days in Australia, our cricket team too appears to be gearing itself up for a repeat performance, which indeed would help this cause”.

On **the international media**, he said, “Particularly in the present times, as Sri Lanka has gone off the earlier headlines prompted by the conflict situation, to fill copy, many of the reports of international media organizations datelined Colombo, are increasingly seen to be drawing on local media reportage which is heavily polarized. In the larger picture, this is very detrimental, because the audiences abroad, who see and hear these as summaries and sound bites, cannot separate the wheat from the chaff, unlike the local audiences, who absorb them in a more informed context, sometimes with a pinch of salt. In the hands of a sub-editor, often a young intern, fresh out of school with little or no appreciation of the ramifications that can follow by inserting a catchy headline, an isolated killing, an arrest, a judicial ruling that attracts attention, a public protest or a strike by a trade union can get projected as though the entire country is in turmoil. Other than for a few reports that specifically focus on the economic sector, most of these reports also do not reflect the quantum change that has taken place on the ground.” To improve the situation he said “On the part of the GOSL, there is need for greater engagement with the media, keeping in mind that after all it is a handful of foreign correspondents reporting out of Colombo to the world, that in an immediate sense sets the agenda and posits the image of Sri Lanka that is seen globally. We must also be realistic to appreciate that not all follow these rules with the same vigour and when transgressions are committed, to deal with them, but in a manner that we ‘do not throw the baby with the bath water’.”

Finally, observing that “while each of the earlier categories are important in their own right in shaping Sri Lanka’s image abroad, one must remain conscious that none of them can be fully relied upon to bring about change, as their dynamics depend largely on factors external to us, and are beyond our immediate control”. He argued that “in order for Sri Lanka to regain its positive image it is within Sri Lanka that we must first moderate the competing narratives we present to the outside world”. He said “to succeed in our effort to regain control of the dominant narrative on Sri Lanka, we need to learn how to “bracket” issues we disagree on internally, as ones on which we need to work harder to iron out our internal differences, without trying to convert them into foreign policy issues and taking them beyond the water’s edge”. He said, “such bracketing, is something we constantly do in our daily lives - within our homes, offices, as well as the religio-cultural communities and organizations we belong to, where we close ranks on some issues for a higher purpose”, and “should also be done for the sake of the country”.

Acknowledging “that this is difficult and that there are differences of opinion amongst us on some issues”, he said nevertheless it was necessary “that we evolved a consensus and desisted from seeking to exploit domestic issues as foreign policy issues, which will result in Sri Lanka continuing to be vilified abroad”. He said “great nations that have succeeded in forging ahead against many drawbacks, are those that have been those that were able to leave domestic issues at the water’s edge”. He said “let alone the moral argument that doing otherwise would be unethical or even unpatriotic, all major political parties of Sri Lanka, having at different times in our recent history faced international vilification, partly as a result of the opportunism of political



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opponents, who had sought to externalize domestic issues, should be conscious that it is also not in their self interest to do so. Given that it is not foreign audiences that elect governments in this country, there is ample empirical evidence to suggest, that it has not worked to the advantage of those who seek to externalize issues - in fact, it has backfired.” (ends)