

A country that always read the cover before the book

A frightening religious force is growing in Sri Lanka, which operates against creations based on events or persons with a religious background. This 'wave of religious intolerance', which arose against a printed book in 1967, has been a great idol that has covered the society fifty-six years on. This wave, which started against a printed work, is now becoming a tsunami against works published in all electronic, printed and digital media such as cinema, radio, television, social media etc. This trend, which began with the censorship of works, has now progressed to criminalizing creators and imprisoning them under criminal law, the ICCPR and the Terrorism Act. What the famous writer George Orwell said some time ago that those who speak the truth will be hated has become true in Sri Lanka today.

In this way, accusations have often been raised against designers, saying that religions, cultures, courts and war heroes are insulted by artworks. Among them, the most accusations are that they insulted religions. Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, etc., all religions without distinction seem to have accused creators at various times.

Such an incident in Sri Lanka was reported for the first time in 1967 by a group of Buddhists against Tennyson Perera's collection of short stories "Buddha born from reclining body". According to it, the secret police conducted investigations, claiming that it was a hateful criticism of Buddhism, and the author denied the allegations. Copies of the book which had been distributed all over the country were also collected by the secret police and finally the book was censored. It is the first time such an event has happened in this country.

Then, in the year 1975, there was a big protest against Martin Wickramasinghe's novel "Bawa Tharanya", known as Hela Maha Ghutkaru, which insulted Buddhism and the Buddha. The Young Buddhist Association also made accusations. Demonstrations and meetings were held. Since the nationwide protests were strong, the ministers of the government also asked the then Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike to ban the book "Bawa Tarana". As the country's state of emergency came into effect, there was pressure to imprison Martin Wickramasinghe under the state of emergency regulations.

Here, the author directly defended his work and the ideologies expressed in it. He was called the anti-Taran and political Buddhists. Here, religious scholars like Amarawansa of Akurati and Sasanaratana Thero of Moratuwa, and prominent writers like Professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra and Gunadasa Amarasekara advocated the ideology that Tarana should not be banned because it is a great work. However, the Prime Minister at that time took steps not to censor 'Bawa Tarana', and by that time more than seven thousand copies had been sold. It is clear when perusing the book that it was written with the rule of realism, but the purpose of building Sidhu's character as a social liberationist was not to insult Buddhism or the Buddha.

It is quite strange that there is an agitation against a work that was supposed to be published before it has even appeared in print. But in the year 2000, a writer named Manjula VEDIWARDENA had to face such a strange incident. The Christian Bishops' Conference, which speculated that his book "Mary Named Mary" might offend the Christian community, asked the then Prime Minister Chandrika Bandaranaike not to allow it to be printed. Having seen the cover and the back cover extract at the press without reading the book, charges were filed based on that. The complaint said that the author had challenged two basic Christian foundations: the incarnation of God into humanity and the Holy Trinity represented by the cross. The author was arrested and fortunately released without remand on bail because the ICCPR Act was not in force at that time.

However, when scholars such as Prof. Sucharita Gamlath and Dr. Sunil Wijesiriwardena were about to go to court against this ban, advocate Ranbanda Senaviratne, who represented the case, passed away, so the book 'Mary Named Maria' was permanently banned before a court debate. Accordingly, it is still an unsolved problem whether or not this work has appropriated Christian religious symbols and beliefs.

In 2005, the anti-creationism religious wave that consumed printed works until then was directed against the TV drama "Idols and Idols". A case was filed against the director and producer of a tele drama based on veteran writer Gunadasa Amarasekara's short story called Enaminewu, accusing them of insulting Buddhism by blowing up a Buddha statue. Such a case was filed by a monk organization called Nikaveratiya Triinikaika Bhikshu Balamandalaya. The news started a wave of religious intolerance as a local journalist added straw to the burning religious fire by publishing a news story without criticism. It was a common sight that the then Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake, Diyawadana Nilame Niranjan Wijayaratne and others issued hateful statements in various meetings as well as in press conferences saying that since the director of the TV drama is a non-Buddhist, this is part of an international conspiracy to destroy Buddhism and strict legal action should be taken against this. It is true that although there was a conversation about this in several major newspapers of the island, only Ravaya and Sunday Observer newspapers published balanced news and discussions. Other newspapers tried to incite Buddhists by publishing news that led to religious conflict.

The case filed by Nikaveratiya Triinikaika Bhikshu Organization under the Arabaya Criminal Law dragged on for three years. It was revealed that the idol, which was created in two parts, was assembled as one idol during the shooting. Also, at the end of the episode, it was created to look like it had been blown up by computer visual effects. It was also revealed that no kind of explosion had been carried out as initially alleged. The court accepted that there was no intention to insult Buddhism or Buddhists, and acquitted director Kristi Shelton

Fernando and producer Ranjith Perera of the charges. Commenting on this, journalist Vikum Jitendra had said, "The results that can be caused by the miscommunication of a report by a careless writer are not good at all."

The peak of oppressing a designer in the name of religion came in the year 2019. It was with the publication of the short story "Ardha" written by award-winning writer and social activist Shaktika Sat Kumara on Facebook. The monks of Polgahawela and Potuhera Shasanarakshaka Bala Mandal filed a case against Shakti, alleging that the short story insulted the Sinhala Buddhist monk and Buddhism. Then he is called to the police to take an oral answer on April 1st, 2019 and will be jailed on the same day. He will not be able to get bail as the case was assigned under the ICCPR Act.

Working in the Polgahawela Divisional Secretariat, Hun also lost his job and was able to get bail only after four months. Shaktika, who was acquitted after a two-year long trial, has now filed a fundamental rights case in the Supreme Court regarding the violation of her human rights.

Shaktika's incident managed to wake up the society about the freedom of thought and speech in Sri Lanka, and a dialogue was also formed in the country. It should also be mentioned that several international organizations such as AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, PEOPLE RIGHTS GROUP, and PEN INTERNATIONAL have been constantly alert about this incident and worked to draw international attention to it.

In the same year, a Buddhist monk filed a lawsuit against the dramatist Malaka Devapriya, who wrote a radio play called "Taruwan Saranai", saying that he insulted Buddhism. In the past few years, complaints were made against KK Srinath's novel "Budhunge Rastiaduwa" and Dilshan Pathiratne's "Dadabbaraya" to the Colombo Criminal Investigation Department and the police, saying that those works insulted Buddhism. But those creators were not arrested or jailed.

The year 2023 will begin with another actress becoming a victim of religious fanaticism.. Actress Natasha Edrisuriya was remanded for allegedly defaming the character of Siddhartha in a comedy stage play. She was arrested under the ICCPR Act. She also had to stay in jail for about a month.

Social media. Sepal Amarasinghe, who was an activist, was also angered by Buddhists for insulting the tooth in a YouTube program. A case was also registered against him under the ICCPR Act and due to that he was sent to remand prison. But after apologizing for his statement in court, Sepal was granted bail.

As the wave of religious intolerance emerges, the above list will continue to grow. Is it wrong to make religious concepts or religious priests the subject of one's works? Is it a threat to

religions? An obstacle to religious harmony? Commenting on this, writer Manjula Vediwardena says this is the opinion.

"It is an irrevocable social responsibility to intercede for the construction of the social discourse that needs to be seen again in the form of philosophic and political thought systems that have been reduced to religions. This is what I continue to do even in the Christian context. The life lost by language can be called back to language. , by conscious interventions that build against overdetermination. Even if crises arise, even if women suffer, it is a continuous process". (Anidda newspaper-2023.01.15)

Sandun Tudugala, a social activist and human rights activist, has made this statement to the BBC Sinhala Service on whether any person has the right to express his views on religions or religious ideologies.

"In a country like Sri Lanka, there are different religions, faiths and different races. Therefore, when expressing something, there is a responsibility to be careful about how sensitive it is to others and how it affects other people's beliefs. Our right and whether it affects someone. We need to be concerned about this within the human society.

In a developed democratic society, a man has the freedom to express his opinion. It can be right or wrong. Then there should be space for the other community to advance the discussion by presenting their criticisms. It should be resolved through dialogue and within a developed democratic discourse. But in my opinion, it is a wrong precedent for the state to intervene and imprison him. It is the state that decides what is insulting. I am 100 percent against this."

Former High Court judge, award-winning writer and expert commentator Saman Wickramarachchi has this opinion on religious insult. "Generally, faiths and religions are sensitive matters. One should be very careful when creating about them, because people have a strong bond with religions. Even by law, such incidents There are restrictions to talk about. The existence of religious priests is based on religious faiths. Their way of life is protected. When religions are criticized, then the way of life of priests is threatened. It is often accused of insulting religions, but the incident of Chinchimanavika is a good example.

Although there were objections against the book *The Crossing*, it did not criticize the Buddha. The subject of it is the life of Prince Sidhu. There is no reason to ban it. In Europe where there are Catholic and Christian religions, humorous stories are written about Jesus Christ, even highlighting sexual matters. But the Catholic Christian priests or the community are not satisfied with it. They just read it and laugh. They don't sue for blasphemy, but in Islamic countries led by Iran, there are religious states. Outsiders cannot oppose it. Because that is the law of that country..

In Sri Lanka, the ICCPR Act is often used to block the creators. If there is a person they need to hunt, this Act is often used to hunt him down. The book *'Da Vinci Code'* about Christ

was not banned in Europe. Even movies were made from it, but that work was censored in Sri Lanka. Most of the time these are done to maintain goodwill with different states and not in any other sense. However, I am totally against censorship."

Buddhism is a doctrine that tolerates criticism and approves of criticism. There is no room for the concept of religious insult in such a religion. Although there is room for religious blasphemy in Christianity and Islam, it is not compatible with the democratic rights and human rights accepted by the present world. The advanced countries of the world, including Western countries, have removed or are removing religious blasphemy laws from their legal systems. Now many countries in the world do not use laws like the ICCPR Act or the Terrorism Act to deal with creative works.

In Sri Lanka, which has a long history, the concept of 'religious insult' did not exist in the past. The blasphemy law that we have inherited was inherited from our time as a British colony. Today, instead of getting rid of it, we are making the Arabization order worse. But Article 14(1)(a) of the Constitution of Sri Lanka provides for freedom of speech and expression, including publication in any media, subject to such restrictions as may be prescribed by law in respect of racial and religious harmony or parliamentary privilege, contempt of court, contempt of court or incitement to offence. Guaranteed.

A country that loses freedom of speech and expression is bound to collapse economically, socially and culturally. A cultured man is not created by imposing limits on imagination. In a society, a man who wants to think and speak in a new way is not born. Every occasion that interfered with the freedom of thinking and expressing ideas in the development of human civilization has been added to the history of the world as black spots. Crucifixion of Jesus, poisoning of Socrates, imprisonment of Galileo, burning of Bruno, execution of Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen are some examples. The civilized world does not approve of any of this. They do not speak with pride. Eight decades ago, Kumaratunga Munidasayan, a well-known Sri Lankan scholar, said, "A nation that does not create new things will not rise in the world." People who don't think in a new way, don't speak in a new way, are suited to rotten politicians. For backward religious institutions.

I think it is appropriate to emphasize the speech given by the current President at the Presidential Film Awards held in November 2023. There, the President said that in the future, decrees will be brought to require Arabaya to never work under the criminal law. Also, the concept of censorship in relation to works of art will be completely abolished. If it works that way, in the future, creators won't be arrested or jailed for defamation, or their works censored. Also, an intellectual social dialogue is essential to create a society free from religious intolerance.

Christy Shelton Fernando

