

Two deaths highlight Sri Lanka's terrible social crisis

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Two tragedies this month underscored the desperate plight facing poverty-stricken families in Sri Lanka. Two mothers, seeing no way out of their intractable financial problems, each drowned one of their children in a local river.

On March 10, Manel Pushpalatha, a mother of five, threw her two-year-old son into the Kalugnaga River at Kalutara, about 40 kilometres south of Colombo. A lorry driver happened to see the struggling child and plucked him from the water, but he died several days later in an intensive care unit.

On March 20, K.P. Rajini, a mother of five in the southern village of Ambalangoda, is suspected of dropping her newly born baby, wrapped in a bag, into a nearby river. The infant's body was found some time later. Both women have been detained by police and face serious criminal charges.

The incidents prompted a deluge of sickening moralising in the Colombo media, denouncing the "cruelty", "inhumanity" and "criminality" of the two women in a bid to divert public attention from the underlying social crisis that drove them to such lengths.

The March 17 edition of *Lankadeepa* explicitly editorialised against viewing the deaths as a social problem. "However, harsh the conditions that impelled the mother to her fatal decision," the newspaper declared, "her act would be unpardonable. Even the benefit of natural justice should certainly be denied to such women." Any attempt to argue otherwise, the editorial continued, "would almost make one an accomplice of homicide".

An editorial in *Lakbima* took an even more cynical

attitude, claiming that the two deaths were part of a broader social phenomenon of mothers failing to do their duty to their children. Most women in modern society, the writer claimed, had "lost their motherly love" for their children as taught in various Buddhist tales. The underlying message was an appeal to the retrograde Buddhist notion of "karma"—that poverty must simply be accepted, as it is the result of wrongdoing in previous incarnations.

There was not a shred of sympathy for the women, let alone any acknowledgement that successive Colombo governments and the profit system bear responsibility for the deteriorating conditions facing the country's urban and rural poor.

Both women came from poor rural families, were compelled to leave school early and faced a constant daily struggle just to survive. Their lives were torn apart by the Asian tsunami, which devastated much of the coastal areas of the island in 2004, and received scant government assistance to get back on their feet. They were uprooted from their villages, their networks of social support and their livelihoods.

After great difficulty, Pushpalatha's family obtained a small house in a 600-unit tsunami housing scheme south of Colombo. Her husband sells lottery tickets, earning around 350 rupees or \$US3 a day, barely enough to provide food, let alone send the children to school. Desperate for money, Pushpalatha also began to sell tickets, but the lottery agent objected to her taking her five children along. Unable to leave her youngest son at home, she decided to drown him.

Rajini's story is similar. After her husband divorced her, she was left to fend for three children and her mother.

She worked in the Middle East as a domestic servant only to return in 2004 to have all her belongings swept away by the tsunami. She left for Dubai again but had to return after contracting chickenpox. Living in a privately-funded tsunami housing scheme, she earned 50 rupees a day from a small store and her son received 300 rupees a day as a helper at a local fish market. Rajini was still indebted to the tune of 200,000 rupees that she borrowed to work in Dubai and completely unable to pay the extortionate monthly interest of 10 percent. The child that she allegedly drowned was from a failed love affair in Dubai.

Campaigning for the April 8 general election, President Mahinda Rajapakse has constructed a fantasy world, telling voters that average per capita GDP has doubled since 2005 when he first took office and declaring that Sri Lanka is becoming the new wonder of Asia. The president's phoney figures take no account of inflation, which hit nearly 30 percent in 2008. After the election is over, the government will be compelled to raise taxes and make deep inroads into public spending to meet the International Monetary Fund's demand to halve the budget deficit by 2011.

Millions of people are well aware that their lives are becoming more difficult. According to official figures, 15 percent of the population lives below the austere official poverty line of 3,087 rupees a month—hardly enough for one decent meal a day. Some 1.6 million people are forced to survive on the government's limited Samurdhi welfare program, which provides up to 1,000 rupees a month for families who qualify. Pushpalatha's family received some Samurdhi money, Rajini's family did not. Last week Media Minister Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena acknowledged that thousands of needy families were denied even this allowance.

Grinding poverty generates myriad personal and social problems: lack of decent housing, chronic indebtedness, poor nutrition, no access to schooling and the list goes on. For many families, an illness, a death or the loss of a job can mean the difference between having enough food or not. Desperate situations lead to desperate actions. During the country's protracted civil war that ended last May, tens of thousands of poor rural youth enlisted in the army, just so their families could survive. Farmers, seeing no solution to their financial problems, commit suicide to relieve their families of their debts.

As a general rule of thumb: the deeper the social divide, the greater the contempt and cynicism in the political establishment for the plight of the poor. The Colombo media that devoted their columns to castigating the two mothers and feigning concern for their dead children has nothing to say about the many youngsters who go without adequate food, housing and education every day. And in the final months of the civil war, the same newspapers that want Pushpalatha and Rajini punished to the full extent of the law defended the actions of the Sri Lankan military in killing thousands of men, women and children and illegally herding more than a quarter of a million Tamil civilians into detention camps.

The *Lankadeepa* editorial on the two women said a bit too much when it ventured into social and economic issues. "The [country's] economic problems are rising to Himalayan heights. It makes one rationalise that [child's] death as preferable to suffering in a society lacking an orderly and speedy way to lift up the masses from the depths of poverty that it has pushed them into." The newspaper offers a false choice—poverty or death—but in doing so acknowledges that the present society, capitalist society, is utterly incapable of resolving any of the immense social and economic problems facing millions of people.

There is a genuine alternative for working people. If the present social order is unable to provide for people, it should be replaced by one that will. Only by refashioning society from top to bottom on socialist lines in Sri Lanka and throughout the region and internationally can the vast resources created by working people be used to meet their social needs rather than the profits of the wealthy few. That requires a complete political break with all the parties of the capitalist class and the building of an independent political movement of the working class to fight for a workers' and farmers' government. That is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party.



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