

Letter at Eid al Fitr

David Furnival: Mission Partner in Sri Lanka

This is the season of emptiness from sunrise to sunset. Bramhani kites circle on the widening gyrations of the air. The sky burns blue above the desperate tinder dry scrub. Arriving here you would find the sandy mid-afternoon streets utterly deserted. Grass grows in well bottoms and paddy fields lie parched. Ramadan is the season of emptiness, inner emptiness from sunrise to sunset. In an hour women will fold a bright length of sari over their head and step out to meet at the remaining wells, in preparation for *Iftar* at the appointed time. Until then the town unintentionally tells of how people recently deserted it and it deserted them under a rain of multi-barreled assault. But now, this time, it is a chosen emptiness.

Decades ago a monk stands in one of this island's sacred spaces exclaiming 'everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.'[†] Now compassion is hard to imagine into this place where people 'shop, cook and clean'[†] around uncountable, unmourned emptinesses. Their stories tell themselves through silences in conversation and in families. You read them in relief in the spaces they still inhabit. Today, in this season of denial, they seem to have engulfed the town in the afternoon's haze.

Eid al Fitr passes again. Friends move from house to home. Between them a funeral moves down the main street. The coffin is carried by members of the man's family, wearing the white of observant Buddhists, a young ex-paramilitary, and a quiet bearded man, white capped like so many of the entourage. It is a sign of hope, a man dying in old age, mourned by all the town's communities. After the dusty burial where death seemed closer to each of us than I ever felt it, the young men especially, I'm greeted with 'Eid Mubarak' – Blessings for Eid! A joyful ending of a chosen season of emptiness.

[†] Thomas Merton (1975) *The Asian Journal* New Directions New York

[†] Jean Arasanayagam (2000) *In the Garden Secretly and Other Stories* Penguin Books New Delhi (in R.S. Sugitharajah (2006) *Text and Terrorism: Communal strife, Sacred Scriptures and Secular stories*).

There are though the unending emptinesses of coffins uncarried to unknown graves.
The celebrations happen around them.