

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Unrest Among Professionals

Political astrology is usually a part-time vocation indulged in by many informed individuals, as a new calendar year dawns. No 1993-watcher in Colombo would have failed to include in his predictions his response to the signals sent out by trade unions of professionals during December 1992, or to project their effects into 1993.

First, government surveyors launched a work-to-rule campaign; then, university teachers' unions began to make plans for trade union action commencing in the new year. In the public sector, reports said that professionals' unions were in the process of formulating their demands. All this activity and agitation had one common objective: to demand substantially higher salaries.

Outrageously low salary standards are the hallmark of professional services in Sri Lanka's public sector. Indeed, professionals in the education sector, from universities to government schools, constitute the most ill-paid category of the salaried strata. The unrest among state employed professionals is now developing against the backdrop of a widening chasm, between remunerative returns for employment, in the state and private sectors.

It was not a mere rhetorical point that the university teachers' union made when it contrasted the salaries of university staff with those of private sector executives. Granted that profit-making private enterprises can and do offer attractive remuneration to their management and administrative cadres, still, these wage discrepancies do acquire an added and more visible dimension in the context of privatization and free-market economic reforms.

In the conventional welfare state, which Sri Lanka was until recently, variances between private and public sector salaries were not very wide. Moreover, the numerous welfare measures that were available across the board—in health, education, food, transport and consumer needs—did tend to off-set some of the effects of sectoral disparities of income. These conventional safety nets are no longer available to middle-class salaried groups. In health care for example, while the state hospital system has deteriorated, the expansion of hospital enterprises, run by private capital, caters primarily to the moneyed classes. Private sector employees' hospital bills are met either by employers or subsidised insurance schemes. State sector employees are generally not entitled to such facilities and their incomes hardly meet staggering private hospital bills.

The expansion of the private sector has also given rise to the spread of an affluent executive class, working for private capital. In Colombo, a state sector executive or a university academic can easily be distinguished from a private sector executive; the latter will always carry symbols of affluence—a flashy new car provided by the company with access to unlimited amounts of petrol, expensive clothes and a certain pattern of behaviour that underlines a new sense of social snobbery. On the other hand, university academics with Ph Ds could be seen travelling by bus, usually in a demoralized mood and invariably wearing demodé clothes bought abroad during the previous sabbatical!

Ayodhya! Ayodhya!!

The Hindu fundamentalist onslaught on the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya has sent tidal waves of violence throughout the sub-continent, engulfing neighboring Pakistan and Bangladesh as well. In India, the quick denunciation of this act of vandalism by the Rao government and by political parties outside the fundamentalist stream prevented the spread of further mayhem, but peaceful Hindu-Muslim ethnic relations will not be easily reconstituted. The entire Indian polity is no longer that which existed before December 6.

What is immeasurably disturbing in contemporary Indian politics is the rise among Hindus of a majoritarian fundamentalism, which is exceedingly intolerant of and aggressively hostile to other religious and ethnic communities. Such fascistic groupings as the RSS and VHP, and the religio-racist BJP, which had until recently been in the political periphery, have now succeeded in gaining a crucial position in shaping India's political agenda. The BJP is vying for governmental power. The slightly unstable Rao regime may survive with the help of the Communist parties. However, if Advani succeeds in forcing new parliamentary elections, the spectre of ultra-sectarian Hindu parties capturing power at the Centre will haunt the Indian electorate.

The events of Ayodhya are a grave challenge to the secular foundations of the Indian polity. Apart from the fact that a religious place of worship belonging to Muslims was demolished, what was yet thoroughly disturbing is how mobs—so-called volunteers—in their thousands were mobilized to take pride in this utterly insane spectacle. As *India Today* reported: "If there were no implements, the frenzied hordes would have used their bare hands to the same effect, so powerful was the poison that coursed through their veins in those few hours of madness." News photographs of delirious mobs, led by ecstatic demagogues in saffron robes, amply testify to the



deadly combination of religious fanaticism and political villainy.

What is equally disturbing is the fact that Indian society and its political leaders have been unable, over the last few years when the mosque issue has been repeatedly raised, to discuss this on a rational, democratic basis and to arrive at a solution. In fact, all political parties, excepting perhaps those of the Left, have been prevaricating on this issue; they have been afraid to totally alienate the *Hindutva* vote. The recent decision of the government - to rebuild the mosque and to build a temple - is a symbol of this prevarication; even after the catastrophe, the government hesitates to stand firm on its secular basis and seeks instead to placate Hindu mobs. In essence, the assault on the Ayodhya mosque by the BJP and its allies, in defiance of court rulings, was an assault on the secular and democratic foundations of the Indian state.

In Sri Lanka, the majoritarian fundamentalism of Sinhalese-Buddhist extremists has repeatedly raised its head whenever attempts towards a political settlement

of the ethnic question are being seriously discussed. The *Sinhala Lakuna* or the *Dharmadvipaya* of today's Sinhala fundamentalists is exactly what the *Hindutva* of the RSS-VHP-BJP alliance means: the creation of a theocratic state for the ethno-religious majority through anti-minority violence.

It is perhaps due to some resilience in the secular political behaviour of the Sinhalese polity that the Buddhist *bhumiputras* have not yet managed to create religious mayhem in Sri Lanka, despite the inflammatory frenzy with which some Buddhist leaders have been appealing to Sinhalese masses. Some Sunday Sinhalese newspapers—notably, *Divayina*—have been in the forefront of spreading inflammatory propaganda, intended to create ethnic and religious hysteria among Sinhalese Buddhists. One may perhaps feel relieved to note that not a single political party has so far opened its doors to these messengers of ethno-religious hatred—the Amarasekeras, the Iriyagollas, the Jayasuriyas, and the Pannasihas.

P

MESSENGERS OF PEACE OR CREATORS OF CHAOS

The Role of Teachers in the Sri Lankan Ethnic Conflict

[Part Two]

Sasanka Perera

Class Presentation of Teacher # 2:

The review session in the 'tutory' at Nugegoda, Colombo, followed a similar pattern—two one hour sessions per week. The content of the lessons and the purpose of the review was the same as in the previous class in Kandy. I retained the same interviewing rights and permission to sit in while the class was in session. The origins of Sinhalese and Tamils were established from the very outset, and as in the class in Kandy the myths of origin were based on the contemporary popular interpretation of the *Mahawamsa*. The exclusive nature of North Indian ancestry for the Sinhalese and the South Indian ancestry for Tamils was stressed.²⁰ Without much difference from the class in Kandy the establishment and destruction of the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa kingdoms were described while blaming the destruction on the Tamils, and reference was made to the present conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese as a continuation of a historical process of enmities.

At this point the only incidents of student participation occurred. Once again the students' contributions were mostly accounts of anti-Sinhalese atrocities committed by Tamil guerrillas which the students claimed they heard from personal sources and newspapers. The teacher also recounted some stories related to him by refugees he had met in a temple at Kotte. He observed that it was a pity that people who had led good lives had to become refugees in their own land. He also told the students that if the Tamils had genuine grievances they had to be looked into, but that the demand for a separate state as well as equal rights were out of the question. As the majority, the Sinhalese had a legitimate right to a larger share of the country's resources, Sinhala must always be the state language while Buddhism was now in its rightful place as the state religion, as in ancient times. Significantly, he stressed that it was not practical to pack off all the Tamils to Tamil Nadu as they have lived in this country for a long time. But he especially noted that the government must repatriate all estate Tamils and bring back the prosperity of the Kandyan Kingdom.

