

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Mollycoddled Minorities?

Some recent editorials and letters in the newspapers and even a few Presidential statements have made a peculiarly political point regarding Sri Lanka's minority ethnic groups: that the minorities have been given too much at the expense of the majority and that these greedy minority communities were still asking for more and that it is high time they are put in their proper place in Sri Lanka's society.

Here is excerpt from a reader's letter which appeared in *The Island* in early December:

All minorities put together do not add upto even 25% of the population but they want everything, special education, privileges, school holidays, jobs even at the expense of the majority community. Not satisfied with this, they now want separate areas for themselves only to govern and yet to live in all parts of the Country....

Where else do the minorities dictate to the majority like in Sri Lanka?....

The day the Sinhala people unite, the minorities will know their actual strength. Why delay this date. For heavens sake join up together "Sinhelayani" forgetting all differences, as we have no other country to call ours, and let also the minorities know their place.

Some newspapers carried editorials echoing similar sentiments.

President Wijetunga's proclamation that he would never allow any minority group to hold the majority to ransom is then not the isolated statement of an idiosyncratic temperament. They all reflect a particular viewpoint current among some middle-class Sinhalese.

Open aversion towards the minorities is perhaps not generally shared by all Sinhalese, despite the fact that all ethnic groups tend to treat each other with varying degrees of suspicion and mistrust. What is still disturbingly significant is that some mainstream newspaper groups in Colombo appear to have decided on a new editorial policy line in which the view that the mollycoddled minorities need to be put back 'in their proper place' is prominently articulated.

A corollary to this 'line' is the propagandist characterization of President D. B. Wijetunga as a leader whose heart is close to the poor Kandyan Sinhalese peasants. The Kandyan peasant origins of Wijetunga are highlighted by all mainstream newspapers in Colombo to confer on him

a vituous aura of ethno-political authenticity; unlike his predecessors and even contemporaries, he is not amenable to 'unjust minority pressure.' As a letter to the editor in one newspaper put it, "like a ray of sunshine, President DBW today seems to be the one and only political leader in this country who seems to act as the statesman (sic) he said he would be. He... is concerned about leaving the hill country within government's writ..."

Deliberately propagated ethnic mistrust has its political utility too. All those who are engaged in this exercise, whether in Sinhala or Tamil societies, also distrust the concept of a negotiated settlement to the present ethnic conflict. They indeed believe and advocate the view that there is no solution short of a complete military victory. In Sinhalese society, a new argument against a negotiated settlement has been evolved by the 'minority-suspicious' intelligentsia. According to them, a politically negotiated settlement is more likely to favour the minorities who have always been asking for more, as against the majority which has so far suffered in silence. This argument is still more passionately thrown at any suggestion of international mediation. The point made in this instance is that the minorities have successfully projected abroad a false picture of a denial of their rights by the majority Sinhalese community, thereby creating an international environment unduly favorable to ethnic minorities.

This is a peculiar political psychology—something akin to a minority psyche—which has often driven some members of the Sinhalese nationalist intelligentsia to feverish action. Even in the recent Tambiah controversy, a repeatedly made point is that Tambiah's book was a part of an international conspiracy against Sinhalese-Buddhists and that a number of powerful and diabolical forces—the UN and its affiliates, the international Eelam lobby and un-named imperialist forces—had joined together to portray the Sinhalese as a barbaric race. Moreover, united, well-endowed and well-organized minorities with international networks—these minorities are so fiendish that they have their paid agents among the Sinhalese too!—have thus besieged the majority Sinhalese whose political leaders (except DBW, of course) are selfish, power-hungry and ready to sell the country for minority votes. Hence the battle cry, "*Sinhalayini*, unite; show the minorities their place."

Bigotry

In November and December 1993, two Tamils were at the storm-centre of the political/ideological debate which was gleefully orchestrated by some newspapers in Colombo. One was S. Thondaman, the leader of the



Ceylon Workers' Congress, who attempted to play a little bit of a power game in the Central Provincial Council. The other was Stanley Tambiah, the author of a number of books on Theravada Buddhism.

Tambiah, the Harvard academic, could have felt thoroughly happy when his name, hitherto known only among university circles, became a household word in Sri Lanka, for his much-maligned book *Buddhism Betrayed?* Tambiah, the good anthropologist, would also have found it to his professional amusement that a Sinhalese tabloid carried a whole page of *vas kavi* (rhymed supplications to harm or destroy an enemy) entreating various demons to instantly destroy 'Tambiah, the Tiger.'

Among the many *contra* responses to Tambiah were letters written by some Sinhalese academics and journalists, a few of whom also thought it prudent to hide their identities. A survey of these outbursts of learned men against 'Tambiah, the Eelamist' brought to the surface a dimension that has not been clearly articulated in recent years: academic racism and intellectual xenophobia.

Tambiah wrote a book in 1986 in which he anticipated the eventual evolution of a humane alternative to the fratricidal ethnic conflict. Tambiah is sure to be dismayed this time, when he begins to reflect on what his critics have said about him and his book. Tambiah, being a scholar of Buddhism, may perhaps forget all the personal abuse and insults heaped on him; but not the kind of racist bigotry and militarism that some members of the Sinhala nationalist intelligentsia poured out in the press and at public meetings.

Race and Class

In the sixties, Edmund Samarakkody, leader of the LSSP (R) published an article in the *Monthly Review*, entitled "Problems and Prospects of the Ceylonese Revolution." Samarakkody, theorizing the dynamics of the coming revolution in Sri Lanka, characterized the Tamil plantation workers as "the epicenter of Ceylonese revolution." In fact, many Marxists argued those days that only the Tamil plantation workers qualified in Sri Lanka to be called a proletariat in the classical Marxist sense of the term, because owning no means of production, they had only their labour to sell. Another Left theory concerning plantation workers was that they were subjected to a two-fold exploitation, as workers and as members of an ethnic minority.

Those are the by-gone days when a deep sense of class solidarity and the vision of socialism had an intellectual appeal to the Sri Lankan intelligentsia, cutting across ethnic identities. Today, in the nineties, things have changed dramatically. 'Class', in the sense of economic relationship between labour and capital, is almost totally erased from the political lexicon. Race or ethnicity has

emerged as the dominant category of political self-understanding among all ethnic groups. When Thondaman, leader of the Tamil plantation workers, refers to his constituency as "my people," the response among Sinhalese nationalists is a furious denunciation of 'the racism of the minorities.'

Race overtakes class and enmity replaces solidarity. Take, for example, the uproar that was created in the press when Thondaman began to negotiate a set of economic demands for plantation workers with the government. Thondaman, who had always mobilized labour on ethnic grounds, tied up his union's economic demands with a political power play, pitting both the ruling UNP and opposition DUNF against each other. Not to be outdone by Thondaman, some Sinhala extremist politicians, monks, academics and journalists carried on a sustained and angry campaign, demanding that the government and opposition political parties totally reject the CWC's union demands. They (mis)interpreted economic demands by the plantation union as a part of an overall plan by Thondaman to carve out a special sphere of influence in the Up Country. According to this view, plantation labour demands represent a larger plan to gradually displace the political power of the Sinhalese in the Kandyan areas.

In nationalist ideology concerning the Kandyan peasantry, there has been a persistent tendency to blame the plantation workers for the economic and social misery of the Sinhalese peasant. In the present debates, the plantation system which brought poor South Indian peasants to Sri Lanka to employ them in conditions of semi-slavery, directly contributed to the persistent poverty in Kandyan village society is often exculpated; or even not mentioned as the source of socio-economic deprivation among both communities. Such an approach, however, requires a class perspective.

NIC: Mission Impossible

Sri Lankan politicians and bureaucrats have shown in recent years that they have a penchant for making, believing in and propagating developmental myths. In the late seventies, under the Jayewardene administration, Singapore was the developmental fairy land that Sri Lanka was supposed to emulate and catch up. The post-1983 ethnic conflict and war shook that dream of the Jayewardene regime; yet economic liberalization policies continued unabated.

Over the past two years, the official policy myth for Sri Lanka has been the achievement of NIC status by the year 2001. So, all political and bureaucratic energy has been marshalled to reach the NIC target.

Not all, however, are convinced about what NIC status should mean for Sri Lanka and whether that is a suitable or feasible target. Dr. Lal Jayawardena's essay in

this issue of *Pravada* is a critical look at Sri Lanka's current policies of growth and development.

Of late, the business community too has begun to express scepticism about the political-bureaucratic myth of an accelerated path to NIC status. In the business pages of the Sunday English press, unnamed industrialists are often quoted to "pooh-pooh NIC status predictions." One newspaper went on to say that "the fear of offending authorities" prevented the business community from making any critical utterances in public fora.

That in a way suggests a point: Sri Lanka is probably in the path to approximating the political status of the NIC countries. In all NICs, fast economic growth did not occur merely due to the magic of 'free market' policies. The so-called free markets were put into operation in such a political environment that "the fear of offending authorities" loomed large. The freedom of business communities to operate in 'free markets' was one that was determined, regulated and controlled by the political-bureaucratic leadership. Both capital 'unbound' and labour 'disciplined' were instruments of policy, defined and implemented by highly authoritarian regimes. **P**

NGO COMMISSION AND EMERGENCY REGULATIONS

To begin with, some facts about the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into NGOs appointed by the late President Mr. Premadasa on 14 December 1990.

The warrant appointing the Commission, after referring in its preamble to a report made by a Committee which had made a preliminary report on Non-Governmental organisations functioning in the country, asked the Commission:

to inquire into and obtain information on the activities of NGOs, whether registered under current laws or unregistered, and to ascertain whether any funds received by NGOs from local or foreign sources had been misappropriated and/or "are being used for activities prejudicial to national security, public order and/or economic interests and for activities detrimental to the maintenance of ethnic, religious and cultural harmony among the people of Sri Lanka."

The Commission was also asked:

to look at the laws and institutional arrangements currently in force "for monitoring and regulating the activities and funding of such organisations", determine whether they were adequate and if not, "what legislative provision would be required to prevent such funds being misappropriated and/or from being used for activities prejudicial to national security, public order and/or economic interests and for activities detrimental to the maintenance of ethnic, religious and cultural harmony among the people of Sri Lanka, or resulting in the exploitation of labour rendered by any person or group".

We reproduce these requirements in order to establish in simpler terms the assumptions behind the appointment of the Commission.

Briefly, there was suspicion that NGO funds were being misappropriated, that they were being used against the interests of national security and public order and to upset ethnic, religious and cultural harmony, and that a legislative framework was necessary to monitor and regulate the activities of NGOs.

The Commission began work in the first week of January 1991 and continued until December 1993. It first published a notice in the newspapers on 10.1.1991 inviting "any person or organisation having any information or complaints" or "desirous of making representations" to communicate with it. The Commission then sent a detailed questionnaire to a number of NGOs, the exact number being yet unknown. From NGOs who answered the questionnaire, we know that a number of them were asked for very detailed information through many subsequent questionnaires; information was asked not only of the organisations themselves but also of the assets of principal office bearers and their spouses and children.

The Commission heard evidence in public from some persons who had made representations and public officials about NGOs in general and the place they occupy in public life. The tenor of this evidence, by and large, was to confirm the existence of a growing NGO sector and that there was a need for monitoring and regulation by the state.

The Commission also had a police unit whose task was to make investigations and record statements.

