

# Thondaman Bashing

Mr. S. Thondaman, plantation trade unionist-turned Cabinet Minister, has the reputation of being a shrewd politician with an uncanny sense of timing; yet, even he may not have expected a Sinhalese nationalist backlash of the present magnitude to his proposals for a solution to the ethnic conflict. When the Colombo press broke the news in mid-November that Mr. Thondaman was planning to visit Jaffna in January with his proposals and make an attempt to mediate between the government and the LTTE, Sinhalese nationalist spokespersons were quick to raise objections to the CWC leader's mission. In December, Sinhalese opposition became more crystallized when the proposals were published; some leading Buddhist monks entered the fray and condemned what then came to be known as the Thondaman proposals. The upshot of the anti-Thondaman campaign was the formation of the *Sinhala Arakshaka Sanvidhanaya* (SAS - Sinhalese Defence League) by ex-Minister Gamani Jayasuriya, a grand nephew of Anagarika Dharmapala and the President of the Mahabodhi Society.

The Sinhalese nationalist argument against Thondaman and his proposals are rather straightforward: 'Thondaman is a Tamil migrant from South India and therefore he has no particular love for Sri Lanka. Being a Tamil leader, he is naturally inclined to serve the interests of the Tamil LTTE. Thondaman has also acquired a tremendous political clout since he is the leader of over a million Tamil plantation population. A minority leader has had the audacity to come out with such an unpatriotic set of proposals, because the majority Sinhalese-Buddhists are not united. Let us thank Thondaman for opening the eyes of Sinhalese Buddhists to the dangers ahead.'

The fact that Minister Thondaman did not receive explicit backing from his President or from his cabinet colleagues was rather unfortunate. He was therefore singled out for attacks by Sinhalese nationalist forces. It is not difficult to flog a Tamil in Colombo and Kandy while there is war in the North. A protracted ethnic war which the state had not been able to contain had created the necessary grounds for political hysteria among some sections of Sinhalese nationalists. Hysteria knows no reason and as a result some Sinhala newspapers have been in the forefront of Thondaman/Tamil bashing.

We include in this note extracts from articles and reports that have appeared in the Sinhala media. Featured in these are extreme Sinhalese ideologues whose views on the current controversy do not generally figure in the English press.

## Dutugemunu's Children

Extracts from an article by Dr. Nalin De Silva in the *Divaina* of December 25 and 27, 1991.

Mr. Thondaman's proposals are put forward at a time when the LTTE is in retreat in the face of military operations. On two previous occasions when the LTTE was in a weak position, there were attempts at discussions or negotiations. On one occasion, it was India that came to the rescue of the LTTE..... Today, once again, the LTTE is weak.... They have no one to turn to except Thondaman. It is against this background that Mr. Thondaman is getting ready to discuss matters with the LTTE and is now putting forward new proposals on the pretext that he is seeking a solution to the so-called ethnic problem.

The objective of these proposals is to grant Prabhakaran a Tamil state without using the word Eelam. In one way, these proposals are even one step beyond the demand for Eelam.

The result of these proposals will be the birth of a Tamil state in the North and East; in a short time one would also witness the absorption of Mr. Thondaman's 'Malayanadu' (Hill-Country State) to this Tamil state.

Dr. de Silva goes on to argue that the Tamils in Sri Lanka have no valid historical claim to nationhood. According to him, all Sri Lankan Tamils are a migrant community who have had no 'traditional homeland' as such.

There are no two ethnic groups that have lived in this country for thousands of years. It is only the Sinhala people who have inhabited this island for over a thousand years and who have a traditional and unbroken culture.... The modern Tamil nation with its Tamil national consciousness is no older than two hundred years. This nation was created as a consequence of British imperialism. There is, for example, no link between today's Tamils and King Elara while there is a very strong link between King Dutugemunu and the modern Sinhala people.

Dr. Nalin de Silva is a Ph.D in Mathematics. In addition to being a senior member of the *Jathika Chinthanaya* (national ideology) school of Sinhalese nationalism, he is also the Head of the Dept. of Mathematics at the Colombo University.

## Who Says there is an Ethnic Question?

The proponents of a military solution to the present conflict flatly deny that there exists an 'ethnic question' in Sri Lanka. What does exist, according to them, is a Tiger invasion. Dr. Gunadasa Amarasekera, a colleague of Dr. Nalin de Silva in the *Jathika Chintanaya* school and a dental surgeon in retirement is a major exponent of this particular notion; he believes that Mr. Thondaman's



proposals are aimed at creating a deep cavity in Sri Lanka's polity so that the Tiger invasion would ultimately be successful. Let us briefly probe into his analysis.

It is essential for us to have a true and correct analysis of the Tiger invaders.

Many of our Sinhalese still think that this Tiger invasion is a reaction to certain injustices done by us, the majority community, to the Tamil people. They also maintain that had those injustices been avoided, there would never have been a Tiger invasion.

Even after the murder of Rajiv Gandhi, have we made any effort to understand the real nature of the Tiger invasion? We have been told that the Tigers did not kill Rajiv Gandhi. We have been told so by none other than Mr. Saumyamoorthy Thondaman, the most powerful man in the country today. Mr. Thondaman has to exonerate the Tigers. Otherwise, how could he propose that the North-East should be handed over to the Tigers? How else would he be able to say in a few years time that the Upcountry areas should be given over to the Eelam? How else could he tell us at the end of this century that all *kallatonis* (illegal immigrants) who claim descent from Prince Vijaya should be banished from this country?

There are three groups of people who argue that the Tiger aggression is a just liberation struggle caused by acts of discrimination by the Sinhalese such as making Sinhala the official language and the standardisation [of marks at university entry tests]. The first group are those hired 'intellectuals' working in various research foundations and institutes; they earn their food and clothing through this contract [of portraying the Tiger aggression as an ethnic question]. The second group consists of the mimic Marxists of this country. They try to analyse the world on the basis of a class struggle that exists in their heads; there are only classes, no nations (*jati*, ethnic groups?) for them. The third group comprise the politicians who would deceive the Sinhalese, even betray them, for their selfish ends.

The only objective of Tiger aggression is to start with the North and the East of this country and then build a Chola empire, a Dravidian empire. This is not a recent dream; it is one that has been in the minds of the Dravidian imperialists of Tamilnadu for nearly two centuries, from even before Indian independence. They have understood that their objective can be attained if they start with the weakest link in the chain, the north-east of Sri Lanka. When they raise the flag of the Chola empire with its tiger symbol in the north-east, when they make that area the core of their empire, then they know they can proceed to realise their ambition of a Chola empire including South India.

According to this analysis, what we are faced with is not an ethnic conflict, born out of a history of discrimination by the majority community, having its dynamics in the internal polity of Sri Lanka, but a naked aggression by a band of fanatics with dreams of reviving the Chola empire. In effect, the Sinhalese are totally blameless; they have done nothing to cause this conflict.

## A Buddhist Jihad?

One component of Mr. Thondaman's aborted initiative was to prepare the ground for a new round of peace talks between the Government and the LTTE. Rev. Professor Walpola Rahula, one time Professor of Buddhism at the Sorbonne University and presently the Chancellor of the Kelaniya University of Sri Lanka, issued the following statement on January 12:

At the moment, there is a dangerous war going on in our country. In the midst of this war, a proposal has been put forward to start peace talks. My sincere belief is that this is not the time for any peace talks. We must not forget the evil consequences of previous attempts to have peace negotiations on the pretext of stopping this war. We must be careful not to act in haste and in a reckless manner.

We must not enter into any peace talks until this war ends in success. Nor should we hold any unnecessary ceremonies. Before everything else, we must successfully conclude this war (*Divaina*, January 12).

Professor Rahula is a respected scholar-monk in Sri Lanka. Late last year, the Burmese military government conferred on him the highest state honours. He is the author of a number of books on Buddhism in English. Among them is the widely-read *What the Buddha Taught*.

Is it, after all, correct for a Buddhist to advocate war? Would there be a contradiction with his/her religion if a practising Buddhist participated in the killing of human beings? According to Dr. Gunadasa Amarasekera, even posing the problem in this way is wrong; it is a false problematic formulated by Western intellectuals and their imitators who have failed to understand the essence of Buddhism. Our 'practical Buddhism,' as opposed to the doctrinal Buddhism, has never rejected the practice of killing human beings, if the latter happened to be the enemies of the Sinhalese. Dr. Amarasekera has presented this astonishingly new formula of political Buddhology in a public lecture to commemorate a leading monk from the South, Rev. Ganegama Saranankara. Some excerpts:

Even at this last moment we must understand the true nature of Tiger (LTTE) invaders. We must be absolutely clear whether we are prepared to totally destroy them or we want to initiate political negotiations which will serve their objectives.

Rev. Ganegama Saranankara did not have any doubts about this. That is precisely why he made the heroic statement: 'Had I been young, I would have thrown away my yellow robe, and gone to the North to kill the Tigers.' This indeed is a message the Rev. Thero has communicated to Sinhalese Buddhists. It tells us what we, as Sinhalese Buddhists, should be doing at this moment.

This, nonetheless, is a big philosophical problem for some people. They are troubled by it. They say: It is true that the Tigers are a bunch of barbaric invaders; still, does our religion, Buddhism, allow us, Sinhalese Buddhists,



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to destroy them? My main objective of this lecture is to tear apart this false argument.

Amarasekera then goes on to quote Martin Wickremasinghe to argue that the latter had already resolved this problem by making a distinction between *Sangha* ethics and lay ethics. Wickremasinghe, according to Amarasekera, has posited the problematique of Buddhist lay ethics in the following way:

The rules of conduct and behaviour and the precepts which form the basis on the eight-fold path are, in the Buddha's teachings, intended only for the Bhikkus (monks) who have renounced lay life. The Buddha has nowhere said that lay people should obey these rules. What lay persons have to do is to construct a code of ethics appropriate to their time and country that also accords with the core values of Buddhism. This code must necessarily arise in the course of their struggle for life. Thus, the taking of life is something condemned by the Buddha's doctrine; refraining from the taking of life is a rule that must be followed by the monks. Yet, there are Buddhists living in the coastal regions who fish for their livelihood. We do not consider this a sin; we do not believe that this will bring them evil consequences.

What is the moral of this particular interpretation of Buddhism? According to Amarasekera, practical Buddhism does not enjoin on laymen the duty of refraining from *pranagatha*, or taking another's life. In other words, practical Buddhism does not forbid the killing of human beings. Therefore, concludes Amarasekera, "we must fight and destroy the invaders and enemies who have become a threat to our religion and culture." Thus is built a doctrinal foundation for a Buddhist holy war.

Dr. Amarasekera's lecture was serialised in the *Divaina*, January 3 to 7, 1992.

### Thondaman Loves the Tigers

The *Divaina* on January 14 carried an extensive report of a meeting of Buddhist leaders held in Gampaha to protest against the Thondaman proposals.

#### Some excerpts:

'Mr. Thondaman's proposals only betray his special concern, compassion and kindness towards Tigers,' stated Rev. Panditha Medagoda Sumanatissa Thero, presiding over a meeting held on January 12 at the Sama Maha Vihara in Gampaha.

This meeting was organised by the World Peace Council of the *Sangha* (Buddhist monks) to express the opposition of Sinhalese Buddhists to and condemn the Thondaman proposals which are intended to merge the Northern and Eastern provinces, to create an Eelam state there and ultimately to destroy the unitary character of Sri Lanka and deprive the Sinhalese of their heritage.

The Rev. Thero also said that many people described the problem in the North as an ethnic problem. In actual fact,

it was not an ethnic problem, but an invasion aimed at establishing a state of Eelam....

Rev. Bengamuwe Nalaka: 'It is very important and urgent for the entire *Sangha* fraternity, including Chief Priests, to form a united force against the diabolical attempts of Mr. Thondaman, who had migrated to this country from South India, to destroy the Sinhalese nation.... We, Buddhist monks, must demonstrate to the whole world that all the vicious propaganda portraying Sinhalese Buddhists as barbarians is simply not true.'

### Thondaman - the Cultural Villain

In a question and answer feature in the *Divaina* of January 19, Rev. Dr. Medagoda Sumanatissa Thero gives a cultural protectionist reason to oppose the Thondaman proposals. Both the question and the answer are equally rich in attributing demonic features to the LTTE and to Thondaman:

Q: Some analysts say that Tamil extremists and the LTTE terrorists are engaged in a ferocious cultural aggression while conducting an armed struggle. Is this assertion true?

A: Very true. It is the LTTE terrorists and Tamil extremists who introduced to this country the violation of human rights, manufacture of fire arms and the drug menace which are alien to Sinhalese Buddhist culture. This cultural aggression has taken place until recently in a very subtle manner. Soon after Tiger terrorism reached the plantation areas and some groups in the plantations took to arms, this surreptitious cultural invasion began to spread all over the country. Mr. Thondaman today is helping this cultural aggression. It is a tragedy that Sinhalese leaders are helping this campaign to destroy the Sinhalese Buddhist culture.

Rev. Sumanatissa, who holds a Ph.D (London) in Buddhism, is a leading member of the World Peace Council, a Buddhist movement sympathetic to the former Eastern bloc.

### Kandy Says 'No' to Thondaman Proposals

A rather unfortunate response to Mr. Thondaman's initiative has come from Kandy Sinhalese-Buddhist organisations which feel threatened by the political clout Mr. Thondaman appears to enjoy in that region. The fact that Mr. Thondaman, a Tamil, is also the leader of the Ceylon Worker's Congress, the largest trade union of Tamil plantation workers, has added to the consternation of Sinhalese Buddhist leaders in the upcountry where tea plantations and Tamil workers are concentrated. The presence in this region of over a million Tamil plantation workers has consistently been resented by Sinhalese nationalist forces. Now, the Sinhalese spokespersons have begun to articulate the view that Mr. Thondaman is using his political clout to the detriment of the upcountry Sinhalese people.

Illustrating this particular perception, the Upcountry *Bhikku* (Monk) Association of the Three Chapters has submitted a memorandum

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to President Premadasa urging him "to totally reject the Thondaman proposals which will deprive the Sinhalese Buddhists of their heritage and rights, result in splitting the country and granting the Tamils an Ellam state instead of an Eelam state."

According to this Association, there is a hidden agenda of the minorities implicit in the Thondaman proposals. Its memorandum, published in the *Divaina* on January 13, sets out the following 'complaints' of the people:

- i. Mr. Thondaman wants to merge the Northern and Eastern provinces based on the notion of a traditional Tamil homeland.
- ii. The government proposes to hand over sterling tea estates to powerful Indian companies under the plantation privatisation programme and to give more powers to Mr. Thondaman regarding plantations.
- iii. Although the minorities are permitted to express their views in a united manner, the government's policy is to repress the Sinhala people, branding them as communalists, whenever they make an attempt to unite.
- iv. Even though Mr. Thondaman is not an MP directly elected by the people, but appointed by the President ('a chit MP'), he enjoys the great confidence of the President and the government.
- v. In the upcountry plantation areas, Sinhalese people have to obtain permission of the Ceylon Worker's Congress even to bury the dead. Similarly, Mr. Thondaman is opposed to settling Sinhalese people in the plantation areas.
- vi. The plantation area has now become a Tamil fortress. Even the government cannot freely enter the plantations. Mr. Thondaman has obtained government permission to settle over 500 Tamil families in Pallekele. By doing so, Mr. Thondaman is establishing Tamil settlements in the outskirts of the city of Kandy. This is a clear attempt to threaten the Sinhalese people.

vi. The government has allowed a building complex that earlier belonged to the Kandy South Transport Board in Katukelle to be utilised for a Muslim school.

### The New Utopia: A Buddhist Theocratic State

What is the vision of the future that these ideologues, at least some of them, have?

"The only solution to the North-East problem as well as to all the social, economic, political and cultural problems of this country is the establishment of a Buddhist state or a *Chakravarti* state, as preached by the Buddha.

In that Buddhist *Chakravarti* state all communities - Sinhalese and non-Sinhalese, Buddhist and non-Buddhist - shall be united under the banner of the Yellow Robe. In the absence of a government run by opportunistic politicians, people will be able to live in peace, happiness, contentment and prosperity.

In the Buddhist state to be established, the Buddha will be the king. The Ministers will be the *bhikkus* (Buddhist priests) who will rally around the banner of the Yellow Robe of great *Arhants*. The center of government will be the Buddhist temple and the state policy the doctrine preached by the Buddha." (*Divaina*, January 21, 1992, from a speech made on January 19 by Rev. Kahapola Sugatharatana at Panadura.)

Rev. Sugatharatana is a lecturer at the Kelaniya University, the Secretary of the Amarapura Chapter of the Sangha, and the Head of the Rankoth Viharaya, Panadura.

We have assembled these extracts as a cross-section of Sinhala-Buddhist opinion now being reported and expressed in the mainstream Sinhala media by leading figures in the movement. We have not, for example, included the views of persons like Mr. Harishchandra Wijetunga, leader of the Sinhala *Bhumiputra* Party, who says that the expression 'Sri Lankan people' can only be applied to the *bhumiputras* (sons of the soil) and the only *bhumiputras* in Sri Lanka are the Sinhala-Buddhists. ■

The spirit of tolerance and understanding has been from the beginning one of the most cherished ideals of Buddhist culture and civilization. That is why there is not a single example of persecution or the shedding of a drop of blood in converting people to Buddhism, or in its propagation during its long history of 2500 years. It spread peacefully all over the continent of Asia, having more than 500 million adherents today. Violence in any form, under any pretext whatsoever, is absolutely against the teaching of the Buddha.

Rev. Dr. Walpola Rahula  
*What the Buddha Taught*