

Those at the receiving end were poor communities belonging to *durawa, karawa, wahumpura* and *nekathi* communities in the district.

This is also where the history of Sri Lanka's Left movement needs to be looked at afresh. Some Sinhalese nationalist critics argue that the Sri Lankan Left parties never made an attempt to understand the soul of the Sinhalese villager and therefore preached an alien doctrine of socialism. On the contrary, the Left understood and responded to the conditions of oppression and discrimination that

kept the soul of the Sinhalese villager in misery. From the 1930s the Left raised anti-feudal issues. They worked in the Kegalle district during the malaria epidemic and campaigned against feudal oppression; and they contested and won seats in rural areas from the 1930s onwards. The Left indeed succeeded where Buddhism failed in Sinhalese society. Sinhalese Buddhism embraced caste hierarchies, incorporated caste distinctions to the Sangha organization and legitimized caste regimentation. The Left introduced to the Sinhalese village the praxis of social egalitarianism.

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The tension between Sinhalese and Muslim trading communities in Mawanella in April 2001, has some parallels to the 1915 riots which of course had a greater spread and intensity. The conditions that produce ethnic riots are often similar. We reproduce below excerpts from Chapter 7 of Kumari Jayawardena's The Rise of the Labor Movement in Ceylon (1972: Duke University Press).

SINHALESE-MUSLIM RIOTS OF 1915

The Economic Background

According to the usual viewpoint, the riots of 1915 were sparked by religious fanaticism as the Buddhists saw in the "intolerance and aggressiveness of the Muslims, a permanent danger to their religious practices and celebration of their national festivals." This interpretation of the riots ignores several important economic factors which had led to the development of resentment against a section of the Muslim population. In the 1911 Census, the Muslims in Ceylon consisted of 234,000 Ceylon Moors, 13,000 Muslims of Malay descent, and 33,000 Coast Moors (or Indian Moors) who had migrated to Ceylon to trade, and who frequently returned to South India. The Coast Moors were mainly engaged in petty trade throughout the country and their small shops provided the foodstuffs and other necessities of life for the urban and rural poor. In the towns, there were many teashops owned by Coast Moors and patronied by urban workers. Since Coast Moor shopkeepers were often pawnbrokers and moneylenders as well, allegations were frequently made of usury and rapacious business dealings.

The feeling against the Moor petty traders increased a great deal after the outbreak of the war in 1914. Restrictions on trade and a shortage of freight caused a decline in imports and exports in the first year of the war. Ceylon's main products were affected by the slump; there was a fall in coconut prices and the depression in graphite and rubber resulted in a reduction of wages and the retrenchment of labour in these industries. There was, in addition, an increase in unemployment among skilled workers in the towns.

The shortages caused by the war led to a sharp and sudden rise in the price of foodstuffs and other necessities, which was most keenly felt by the poor. The Governor, describing the rise in prices, and the tendency of retail traders "to exact exorbitant prices from poor people," wrote, "In a peasant country where retail prices are expressed in cents and half cents, even a slight rise in prices is both felt and resented by the customer."

The Political Factors

The riots of 1915 should also be viewed against the political climate of the time because political motives were invariably linked with religious unrest. During the years preceding the riots there was considerable political agitation connected with constitutional reforms, the temperance movement, and the salaries scheme. There had also been an increase in communal tension and an outburst of nationalist feeling.

The animosity directed against the Muslims was a result of the growth of communal and religious awareness on the part of the Sinhalese press, and the preachings of Anagarika Dharmapala. One of the aspects of the increase of national feeling was the hostility that developed against 'foreigners,' especially Europeans and Indians resident in Ceylon. The 'decline' of the Sinhalese race and the Buddhist religion was blamed not only on the European conquests, but also on other minority groups in Ceylon, and the Sinhalese newspapers and Buddhist journals led this campaign.

There is also some evidence to suggest that the Sinhalese shopkeepers and traders were active in the campaign against their Moor competitors and that many of the 'ringleaders' alleged to have been involved in leading the riots were from the rural and urban Sinhalese Buddhist 'petty bourgeoisie.' In 1909, for example, a member of this class, Piyadasa Sirisena, the popular novelist who was the editor of the *Sinhala Jathiya*, advised the Sinhalese to 'refrain from having transactions with the Coast Moor, the Cochin and the foreigner.' The *Sinhala Bauddhaya*, run by Dharmapala was the most vociferous in its attacks on 'the increasing misdeeds of the Tamils, Moors and Europeans' who were referred to as "infidels of degraded race." In 1912 this journal wrote, "From the day the foreign white man stepped into this country, the industries, habits and customs of the Sinhalese began to disappear and now Tamils." An official referred to "articles of an extremely seditious nature" appearing in the *Sinhala Bauddhaya*, which published "the outpourings of Anagarika Dharmapala, directed against constituted authority, the white man and every foreigner." Another Buddhist publication associated with Dharmapala, the *Mahabodhi Journal*, referred with disapproval to the "merchants from Bombay and peddlers from South India" who traded in Ceylon, while the "sons of the soil" abandoned agriculture and worked like "galley slaves" in the urban clerical jobs. In 1915, when tension was developing between Buddhists and Muslims, a Sinhalese daily paper, the *Lakmina*, referring to the Coast Moors, wrote, "A suitable plan should be adopted to send this damnable lot out of the country," and another daily, the *Dinamina*, condemned "our inveterate enemies, the Moors." Some of the editors of Sinhalese newspapers which carried inflammatory letters making complaints against Moor traders were charged under martial law in 1915, and papers like the *Sinhala Bauddhaya* and the *Sinhala Jathiya* were banned by the government.

There was considerable upsurge of political agitation and nationalist opinion, especially after the outbreak of the war in 1914. The discontent of the young radicals made itself felt through several nationalist organizations formed in 1915, including the short lived Nationalist Party, and the Young Lanka League (whose activities will be discussed in later chapters). The medium of drama and poetry was also used as an effective way of expressing nationalist sentiments which would otherwise have been regarded as seditious. Playwrights like John de Silva and Charles Dias wrote rousing historical and modern dramas in Sinhalese which, according to a nationalist journal, the *Searchlight*, were intended 'to rekindle the dying embers of patriotism.' The enthusiastic crowds which packed the Tower Hall where these plays were performed were not restricted to the elite but included the Sinhalese-speaking lower middle class and the urban workers. The political content of plays on Sinhalese kings such as John de Silva's *Sri Wickrema Rajasingha* and *Duttugemumu*, and the provocative anti-British dialogue in his satire *Sinhala Parabava Natya* (which portrayed the decadence of the Sinhalese through foreign influences) attracted the attention of the vigilant Inspector-General of Police, H.L. Dowbiggin. In a report to the Governor on the spread of nationalist activities, he referred to the "series of stirring Sinhalese plays produced by John de Silva with the object of creating a spirit of nationalism."

The sentiments expressed and language used in publications like the *Searchlight* were characteristic of the nationalist opinion of that time. "If in your veins the blood of the lion race does not run, if you are so wanting in patriotism and national self respect, if the glorious past of our loved Lanka does not appeal to you... then by all means be sycophants of the government and drag into the mire, the fair name and fame of ancient Lanka."

DEATH OF TESSA BARTHOLOMEUSZ

The SSA records its deep sorrow at the untimely death on 16 May 2001 of Professor Tessa Bartholomeusz in Florida. Tessa who was born in Sri Lanka of Burgher origin, was the Professor of Religion at the Florida State University. She visited Sri Lanka frequently for field work and was closely associated with the SSA. Her publications, include *Women Under the Bo Tree*, *Buddhist Nuns Sri Lanka* and with Prof. C.R. de Silva she edited *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka*. Her work was widely appreciated internationally and in Sri Lanka, and her latest book *Defense of Dharma: Just-War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka* will appear posthumously. All her colleagues at the SSA mourn her loss, as a scholar and a friend.