

Language - the reality and the pretence

The 90th birthday of Dr. N.M. Perera was commemorated by the LSSP on the 6th of June with a meeting. It was presided over by Dr. Carlo Fonseka; there were three speeches - by Dr. W.D. Lakshman on his economic thinking and practice, by Dr. Jayampathy Wickremaratne on his constitutional ideas and by Dr. Chandrasiri Palliyaguru on NM and culture. It was, in one sense, an occasion worthy of the man, devoted not to adulation but to critical assessment. In another sense, it was a slur on the man and his achievement.

The Lanka Sama Samaja Party and its leaders, particularly Drs. N.M.Perera and Colvin R. De Silva, had consistently stood for the parity of language - Sinhala and Tamil - in Sri Lanka. They stood for the use of both languages in administration and for the right of every citizen to deal with the administration in the language he was accustomed to use. Dr. Wickremaratne was particularly eloquent on this issue. He quoted Dr. Perera as having said that every Sinhalese and Tamil, whether he lived in Point Pedro or Dondra should be able to communicate with and obtain replies from the government in his own language. However, the LSSP was unable to have this right constitutionally enshrined in the 1972 constitution, even though Dr. Colvin R. De Silva, one of its leaders, will go down in history as the prime architect of that constitution. This failure arose from the balance of political forces at that time, when Sinhala nationalist forces were in the ascendance. There are critics who speak of this failure as an act of opportunism by the LSSP, but it is more likely that they acquiesced in this situation as a trade off in the interests of other changes they were working into the constitution.

Dr. Wickremaratne was very scathing about the Sinhala nationalists. He claimed that, had the LSSP ideas on language policy been accepted at that time and implemented, the whole course of ethnic relations since then would have been different.

Given this pride in its record on the language issue, and that its membership right from the beginning was drawn from the progressives of all ethnic communities, how does one explain the meeting itself, the way it was linguistically organised ?

The banner on the stage was only in Sinhala. The chairman's comments and all three speeches were in Sinhala. There was no attempt to use any other language, even to give any summaries in Tamil, though there were in the audience many Tamils who had come there to honour N. M. Perera, particularly old-time party men. They obviously felt left out. Assuming that none of the speakers knew Tamil, it was still possible for them to have spoken in English, which is after all en-

shrined in the constitution as a national language. How does one explain this insensitivity ? We use the word 'insensitivity' because we refuse to think that the LSSP and its leaders have now become Sinhala nationalists. Their attitude on the ethnic question is still democratic and just. Nevertheless, they are insensitive to the use of language and to the resonances which their act of omission will create in the Tamil mind. It is precisely this kind of act which will create doubts in the Tamil mind whether any legal or constitutional arrangements which recognize Tamil rights, whether linguistic or political, will ever be carried out with sincerity.

Even the government is guilty of such lapses. A meeting of some 600 senior government officials, among whom were Tamils, was conducted entirely in Sinhala, with the President and Dr.G.L.Pieris speaking only in Sinhala. The speeches were apparently translated simultaneously into Tamil but there were too few earphones for the many Tamil officers present. The result, however, was the same estranged feeling.

The current language laws are inadequate and are barely implemented. This reality must be borne in mind when new arrangements to resolve the ethnic question are being considered.

Human Rights and the War

Human rights are one of the first casualties of war. The exigencies of the war, the need to mobilise all efforts for its successful prosecution are deemed of such tremendous importance that they serve to push human rights to a place of secondary importance.

This is already beginning to happen with the outbreak of hostilities in April.

The government is under pressure from various sources. The Sinhala nationalist lobbies, happy with the breakdown of the peace negotiations, are promising the government their full support if it were to embark on the war with the objective of exterminating the Tigers. If not, the threat is that they will mount a nationalist campaign against the government. These lobbies also make no distinction between the Tigers and non-Tiger Tamils.

Since the LTTE had earlier brought the war to Colombo, it was the opinion of many, backed by reports attributed to various intelligence sources, the Tiger attacks on Colombo were to be expected. This places all Tamils resident in Colombo and the suburbs, particularly new arrivals from the north or the east, immediately under suspicion. This accounts for the arrest of thousands of Tamils in and around Colombo during the past two months.

It is agreed without argument that the security forces have to ensure the safety of citizens in Colombp. Yet are these indiscriminate arrests the best way of doing that ? We call the arrests indiscriminate because over 90% of all those arrested are released within two or three days, after very cursory checks. This indicates that arrests were made, not on any genuine suspicion, but merely on the fact that they were Tamils.

Arrests are not only haphazard but also vindictive. Persons are taken into custody at night or on the road, with no information in most cases to any kin. Women are searched by males. Those arrested are thrust into overcrowded cells or herded into police stations far from the scene of arrest. Access to those arrested is restricted. Money is often extorted from visitors.

Buses are stopped for random searches. All Tamils are asked to get off the bus; their persons and goods are minutely searched. It may be an hour or so before they are allowed to resume their journeys. When they board the bus they are met with hostile looks and racist remarks. The fact that all Tamils were subjected to a search immediately gives the proceedings a racist colour.

These operations of the security forces do not meet with any public disapproval. As a matter of fact, all the disapproval is of the Tamils for being Tamils. This is the kind of climate that is now growing in the south. All the propaganda being put out by the security forces to be aware of bombs, to report strangers in their neighbourhood to the police, to be vigilant, reinforce

the distrust of all Tamils. A reliable source tells us of an extreme example of such prejudice: a nurse, attending on the birth of a child to a Tamil woman tells another nurse "Look, we have brought another Tiger to this world".

While these arrests and the treatment they are subjected to are clear violations of their human rights, other manifestations of a return to the barbarities of 1988 and 1989 are also becoming visible. Seven or more dead bodies have floated down the Bolgoda river within a period of two weeks. They were mostly shot and the hands and feet of some of them were tied up; so far, the bodies remain unidentified. Several such dead bodies have also surfaced in and around Batticaloa. Extra-judicial executions are back to haunt us.

The government appears to be aware that violations of human rights are indefensible and are likely also to lose the international goodwill that now exists. It has reactivated the Human Rights Task force, increased its powers to look into arrests and detentions and to ensure that the rights of citizens are protected.

There is however another area in which the government does not appear to be sensitive. This has to do with the press. Dissatisfied with the way the war and the government role in the war are being reported by some sections of the press, the government has been making threatening noises. Even the President has said that the necessity to curb the press may arise. It is to be sincerely hoped that the threats to press freedom, however disagreeable its use may be, will not be translated into action.

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