

MESSENGERS OF PEACE OR CREATORS OF CHAOS?

The Role of Teachers in the Sri Lankan Ethnic Conflict¹

[Part One]

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*"The student will be what the teacher is."
- Sinhala Proverb*

The Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, a 20th century phenomenon involving the country's Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority is mostly the result of post independence politics of ethnicity and discrimination; however some roots reach back into Sri Lanka's ancient history — or what is thought of as history. The problem reached civil war proportions in the 1980s and later led to the military intervention of Indian armed forces in the late 1980s. Today, this conflict still continues unabated. It is estimated that it has claimed over 50,000 lives. The purpose of this paper is to assess the role played by teachers in creating attitudes which contributed to or justified the ethnic conflict. I shall primarily focus my attention on Sinhalese school teachers. However, in a less systematic manner I shall also assess the role played by Tamil teachers.

In the preface of a 1960 study entitled *Education for Racial Integration in Ceylon*, Siriwardena stated that in the context of increasing ethnic conflict, all aspects of education must be utilized to foster national unity and better relations among various ethnic groups. He also hoped that the suggestions made in the study would catch the attention of teachers who ultimately have to play a major role in achieving the desired goal of national unity (Siriwardena 1960:11).

However, over the last thirty years Siriwardena's anxious hopes mostly remained restricted within the pages of his thesis in the main library at the university of Peradeniya. Similar anxieties voiced by other writers were also never heeded, or used to form practical politics by any of the post-independence governments. Perhaps, the contents of this paper will share the pitiful fate of those earlier discourses!

It must be borne in mind that issues associated with education is only one aspect of the multi faceted ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. However, education plays a

consistent role in aggravating the conflict. In a voluntarily segregated society such as Sri Lanka, schools are the most effective line of battle in the direction of potential integration. Desegregated schools alone cannot achieve this goal because segregation *per se* is not necessarily the cause of heightened ethnic conflict. While it clearly increases the chances of conflict, the role of teachers and the contents of textbooks also play positive or negative roles, minimizing or maximizing chances of conflict. In Sri Lanka schoolteachers have helped create and maintain the rift between Sinhalese and Tamils (and between other ethnic and religious groups). I suggest that this negative tendency is the direct result of segregated education.

In Sri Lanka, as in any other society, the role of a teacher in formal or informal education is to communicate knowledge and be a model for students. While in a broad sense the role of teachers may be similar in most societies, certain values and norms unique to the cultural traditions of each society are internalized by teachers and society at large so that the role teachers play is different in different societies. In Sri Lanka a teacher is always to be followed and respected, and her knowledge, wisdom and commands must be accepted unconditionally. It is usually discouraged to question a teacher, even at the university level. The overall position of teachers must be understood within the context of how Sri Lankans (especially the Sinhalese) relate to all authority figures. All authority figures (from bureaucrats to police officers) are treated with fear and respect. These attitudes are related to such typical Sinhalese concepts like *lejja*, *baya*, *gauravaya*, *nambuwa*, and *tatwaya*, all of which are ultimately associated with ideas of shame and status.

The values supporting these views have ancient roots going back to medieval Sri Lankan cultural traditions, and are generally accepted even though they are contrary to the Buddhist doctrinal ethic of questioning before accepting. This stereotypical status of teachers is idealized and internalized through societal and school socialization from a very early age. Even school textbooks promote this exalted position of teachers. For example, textbooks refer to teachers regularly as *gurutuma* (a reverential version of teacher) as opposed to *gurubaraya* and *etuma* or *etumiya*

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(a reverential version of "he" or "she") as opposed to *ohu* or *eya* (*Sinhala* 5 1982: 1). The Sinhala Reader for grade five (this is the 1982 version of many such texts published over the years), describes a social service organization initiated by a group of schoolchildren who want to ensure the participation of the entire village student population in their venture (*Sinhala* 5 1982:32). They expect that Mrs. Jayasundera, a schoolteacher, will assure full student participation, since she is "respected and feared" by the students. The ability to scare students is another typical characteristic attributed to Sinhalese schoolteachers. Throughout the lesson she occupies an exalted position and is described as a source of undisputed knowledge and respect:

They are somewhat scared of her. If she tells the students to come, they will definitely come. No one has ever disobeyed the orders of Mrs. Jayasundera.

Such descriptions instill in the child a sense of broad respect (mixed with fear) towards the teacher. When such ideas are strongly implanted in schoolchildren, teachers are in a position to influence them in a profound manner, for better or for worse. In this sense, within the school system, teachers form an extremely influential component. This is more important when one considers that teachers are the agents of change and therefore creators of attitudes, values and perceptions and transmitters of messages and symbols. Considering the influence teachers can wield, their specific roles have to be clearly defined, compatible with the needs of the country.

Dynamics of Recruiting and Training Teachers

Despite many irregularities ("political" appointments) in the assignment of teachers to Sri Lankan schools, it is generally accepted that teachers must be a specially trained group of people. Teachers for the most part are recruited from two sources:

1. **Graduate Teachers:** These are graduates from Sri Lankan universities who are given teaching appointments upon completion of their education. They receive no particular training in teaching but are hired mostly for subject knowledge. In recent times however, even this has been overlooked and graduates in history, Sinhala and political science have been appointed as kindergarten teachers. Some of these teachers get in-service teacher training in diploma courses conducted by the Ministry of Education and University of Colombo.
2. **Trained Teachers:** These are graduates of Sri Lankan high schools who undergo further training in government teacher training schools where some are specially trained to teach one or more subjects

to primary and secondary schoolchildren. They are also supposed to be trained in methods and the psychology of teaching.

Most teachers in Sri Lankan schools today have been through the segregated school system themselves, including university education. Moreover, all teacher training schools are also ethno-linguistically segregated. Training colleges in Sinhalese areas teach exclusively in Sinhala while those in Tamil areas teach in Tamil. English is used only to teach English language trainees. These training schools perpetuate the social organization of the larger society and the segregated school system. In contemporary Sri Lanka, younger teachers (whether trained or graduate teachers) are raw products of segregation with all its negative inheritances: they live in a segregated society, they study in segregated schools and gain their professional qualifications in segregated training colleges or universities. If segregated society and schools are an obstacles to better inter-ethnic relations, it is reasonable to assume that those obstacles are internalized in teachers' attitudes and perceptions.

Graduate teachers obtain professional qualifications from one of eight universities. They gain no competence in methods of teaching unless they undergo the non-mandatory diploma course. In comparison, student-teachers at training colleges receive such instruction along with loosely constructed and vaguely articulated classes of educational psychology.

Once teachers are trained or selected, their respective assignments to various schools are based on principles of segregation and ethnicity. Sinhalese teachers are sent to Sinhala schools and Tamil teachers to Tamil schools. Teacher assignments also occur on a religious basis where Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu schools prefer teachers who are co-religionists. If teachers are assigned to schools with a different religious orientation than their own, it does not usually become a major problem as long as teachers teach subjects unassociated with religion.

When discussing the contribution of teachers in increasing ethnic conflict, a theme that will constantly arise is the failure of training colleges to introduce special programs to train teacher trainees to handle the challenges of plural Sri Lanka. Without specific training, teachers cannot be expected to offer programs on their own.

In 1960 Siriwardena expressed the following sentiments:

The different ways and means of teaching both academic and practical subjects with a view to integrate the diverse races in our community must be made familiar to the teacher trainees. It is the responsibility of the training colleges, which train the teachers who mould the young, to initiate experiments in inter-group education. The fact of segregating training colleges on the



basis of language is not sound from this point of view. If on the other hand, we have cosmopolitan training colleges where trainees of all communities can live together under the same roof, they would be better adjusted and less prejudiced teachers who can undertake the task of educating for national consciousness. Conditions as they are at present do not facilitate free mixing between teacher trainees belonging to different races (Siriwardena 1960: 77).

Sri Lankan education authorities have yet to pay proper attention to such warnings. Before and immediately after independence some attention was given to such ideas, apparent from a number of reports and academic articles published. Such enthusiasm steadily declined as Sri Lanka adopted a path towards ethnic politics, Within such a climate Sinhalese hegemony became a way of life and notions of a plural society were dismissed. Hence there was no political or social impetus to train teachers for a plural society. Lacking proper training and a cohesive policy to guide them, teachers are not capable of building a systematic and accurate understanding of the ethnic diversity in Sri Lanka.

The Teachers' Role in the Ethnic Conflict: Creation of Ethnic Attitudes and Perceptions through the Transmission of Messages, Symbols and Interpretations.²

When students come to school, they have already absorbed a variety of values and prejudices as a result of socialisation. These are reinforced in peer groups within and outside the school environment. School textbooks also play a significant role in this process. The teacher can relate to all these different sources of information and weld them together into an integrated whole for each student. In doing so the teacher's teaching ability as well as personality exerts considerable influence. By focussing on how teachers and education contribute to inter-ethnic conflict, it is not my intent to denigrate the truly positive contributions that teachers otherwise make to society. Nonetheless, my concern in what follows is with the role that teachers play, which contributes to ethnic conflict. This role is primarily as creators of ethnic attitudes and perceptions. They also give such perceptions legitimacy because of their exalted position as teachers. In teaching some subjects (religion, language, social science) certain exclusive stressed. This is achieved through one of the following methods:

1. Direct negative portrayal of groups other than one's own.
2. Avoidance of mentioning groups other than one's own, thereby establishing the superiority of one group over all others.

In Sri Lanka the second approach is most widely favoured although in many cases a combination of both is used. This shortcoming in the educational process is

largely the result of a failure in curriculum development. Teachers can diffuse biased subject matter by discussing the contents of texts and curricula in a rational manner. Alternatively, they can strictly adhere to the syllabus and perpetuate the negative images of the course. Given their lack of training and will the latter is the more usual outcome.

This problem is most apparent in the teaching of religion. Sri Lankan schools usually teach only one religion depending on the religious orientation of the school. Religions are taught from a list of four which include Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Organisations representing all these religions accept that they should be taught in schools (Hewege in *Ceylon Daily News*, December 20, 1981). But it is rare for more than one religion to be taught in a single school. Even though a number of committees have been recommended that there should be an attempt to foster inter-religious understanding and bring about unity among all religions, these recommendations have not been implemented.³ This has mostly resulted from the lack of interest of educationists as well as petty differences between various religious interests.

What has happened is a further isolation of religious groups in religiously-exclusive schools where religious education is conducted by teachers who belong to the same faiths as their students. Within such a context it is not surprising if one's own religion is idealised to the rejection of other faiths. Between 1976 and 1979 religious textbooks contained a section on the festivals and observances of all religions practised in Sri Lanka. However, these themes made up the last portion of the course, and invariably, get only marginal attention by teachers and students. Discussion with Christian students who had used these texts indicated that they "had a lot of fun reading about Buddhist festivals." They considered that the idea of the "Buddha running around on lotuses was silly and quite funny".⁴ Questioning the teacher who had taught these (grade 7) students seemed to substantiate their statement. According to them, when one is conducting a difficult lesson (eg., about other religious festivals) it is easier for students to grasp and remember it if it is conducted in a light-hearted manner. However, the last-ling lesson these students learned was not to respect other religions but to consider these religions as '*pissu agam*' and their believers as '*pisso*'.⁵ A number of Buddhist students[grade 7] also remarked that the re-awakening of Christ was quite a good 'ghost story'.⁶ However, it was not always common to get such candid answers.

Based on these types of revelations I do not suggest that 'religious education' always takes this form. However considering the exclusive surroundings in which religions are taught, such occurrences are not surprising. Moreover, Sri Lankan religious education courses are not designed to foster inter-religious or inter ethnic understanding. Their Primary aim is to project the virtues of



the particular group to whom the course is directed. This shortcoming is contrary to the state's declared goal of religious education⁷ Under such circumstances only teachers can be expected to moderate the situation, but given the lack of breadth in their training and lack of will, it is difficult to expect such an outcome.

In Sinhala-medium schools the material most damaging to harmonious inter-ethnic relations is transmitted, while teaching Buddhism Sinhala and Social studies. In teaching Buddhism, the education authorities have always thought it pertinent to include lessons on aspects of Sri Lankan history. For example, the 1976 Buddhist text-book for grade 7, (*Buddha Dharmaya* 7), includes two chapters on the historical development of the Polonnaruwa Period.⁸ In these lessons Sri Lankan history is discussed in terms of Sinhalese confrontations with Tamils. I believe that religious education (if it has to be included as a school subject) should be set in a contemporary Sri Lankan context, and should discuss the doctrinal and ritual aspects of the religions concerned within that context. This way it will be easier for students to relate what they learn (hopefully something positive) to the society in which they live. Episodes of national history when taken out of context can be a dangerous inclusion. Of all the texts on religion such inclusions are found only in Buddhist texts, giving teachers and students an opportunity to discuss historical (or mythical) episodes. These lessons are more popular among students than lessons dealing with mundane aspects of religious doctrine. The teacher could discuss these lessons without arousing ethnic antagonisms. But given the limitations of teacher-training as noted earlier it is at present difficult to expect them to do so.

All the teachers of Buddhism⁹ interviewed were of the opinion that religious education should contain lessons on Sri Lanka's past. The students, they argued, must be told of the struggles that the leaders of the country undertook to preserve the faith. While discussing these topics the untrained Sinhalese Buddhist teacher rouses anti-Tamil feelings among her students. The texts play a collaborative role in this regard. The Buddhism teachers (from grades 1-8) of one Sinhalese Buddhist school in Colombo mutually agreed on the sentiment expressed by one teacher: "these *demalas*¹⁰ have always tried to put us (Sinhalese) and our faith (Buddhism) down. Our younger generation must understand our history, if they are to safeguard the faith and the nation in the future."

It is true that South Indian invasions did have a negative effect on Buddhism, as invaders like Kalinga Maga (12th century) destroyed Buddhist temples, burnt libraries, killed priests and so on. However, to consider these South Indian attacks as proof of the fact that Tamils have been predisposed to commit evil since ancient times is too simplistic. South Indians, most of whom speak Tamil, have a long history of statehood that extended its influences throughout insular South East Asia. Consequently, from

time to time South Indian kings invaded and occupied parts of Sri Lanka. These invasions and occupations were wars of dominance fought between regional rulers. These wars were not defined in either ethnic or linguistic terms until they became too frequent and destructive. Even then, they were not ethnic conflicts. The Sinhalese and Tamil labels were used only in times of constant external aggressions and not during the long periods free of conflict. Therefore, the destruction of Buddhist monasteries and temples was the result of invading and occupying foreign armies and not the result of race riots or ethnic conflict as is popularly portrayed.

The fact that most of these invaders spoke Dravidian languages does not make these wars, wars of ethnicity or race. But to teachers the invaders were simply Tamils, who attempted to subjugate the Sinhalese and their land as they do today. This is the message most teachers transmit to students. Students internalize this faulty information and form wrong perceptions. They do not realise that the resident Sri Lankan Tamils at the time probably had little or no role in this destruction. They also do not learn about the contributions Tamil kings and chieftains (eg., Elara) made to Buddhism, the association Sri Lanka had with Buddhist centers in Tamil South India or of South Indians (or people with a Tamil or South Indian ancestry) who fought with the Sinhalese against invading South Indian forces (eg. Alakeshwara).

History lessons in Buddhism courses are poorly designed and generate highly ethnocentric feelings. Positive lessons from Sri Lankan history are excluded. The manner in which anti-Tamil feelings are internalized is exemplified in the following incident. After helping a grade 5 male student with his homework, which included Buddhism, I asked him what he knew about the Anuradhapura period (4th century B.C. to 10th century A.D.). Among the things he said in Sinhala was (Even in those days, tigers¹¹ had attacked).

Discussions of particular lessons in social studies also allow this scenario. Of the 28 grade 9 students interviewed,¹² 26 claimed that the most interesting lessons were the ones dealing with Sri Lanka's ancient history. Of these, 24 also claimed that teachers took more interest in discussing these lessons, which added to the students' own enjoyment. This shows that nearly all grade 9 students enjoyed ancient Sri Lankan history lessons in their social studies course because of the contents of the lesson as well as the teacher's enthusiasm. For the students the most interesting and memorable aspects of these lessons were the battles between Sinhalese and Tamil kings. This interest was consistent among both Sinhalese Buddhist and Christian students despite the fact that in some of the most popular stories (eg., the battle between Dutta Gaminia Abaya and Elara between 167 and 137 (B.C.) the allegedly declared goal of the Sinhalese leader was the protection of Buddha Sasana (Buddhist Order). This interest was similar among teachers as well. Of the 20



grade 9 social studies teachers interviewed (both Christian and Buddhist), 18 claimed that they enjoyed teaching lessons dealing with history and spent more time preparing and teaching such lessons.¹³

Although my original intention was to observe the actual teaching process of these lessons, this was not possible because schools were closed intermittently throughout most of 1988 as a result of the J.V.P.-led insurrection. Besides, school authorities were also unwilling to let me into their schools because of the unprecedented political and social unrest in the country.

However, I was able to observe this process in two private 'tutories'¹⁴ (one in Kandy and one in Nugegoda, Colombo). Both were taught by different teachers who were regular social science teachers in schools. Both classes together had a total enrollment of 33 male and female students who were Buddhist and Christian. I requested both teachers to teach the history lessons prescribed for grade 9, as a review session for potential end-of-year examinations. I also requested permission to question the students after each class—ostensibly to test their subject knowledge. As far as teaching abilities were concerned, both teachers were above average, and managed to keep the interest of the students for the entire duration of each one-and-a-half hour session.¹⁵ The two teachers were typical in the way they conceptualized and presented the material.

Class Presentation of Teacher # 1:

The class in Kandy began with a description of the origins of Tamils and Sinhalese. In a map of India and Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese, referred to as Aryans, were described as coming from the eastern and western coasts of North India. The Tamils, described as Dravidians, were claimed to be invaders from the Chola (Soli), Pandya (Pandi) and Kerala kingdoms in South India. The teacher made no departure from the traditional and incomplete, if not faulty, description of the origins of the two ethnic groups. In the early 20th-century tradition of Buddhist revivalists, the terms Aryan and Dravidian were used in a racial sense, and not in the normally accepted linguistic sense. The racial or ethnic interpretation of these linguistic terms is quite common in the collective discourses of both Sinhalese and Tamil educational, literary and historical circles.

While talking about the rise of the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa kingdoms, the teacher made special mention of the destruction of these and other kingdoms. According to him, the destruction of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa was engineered by Tamils, the forefathers of contemporary Tamils. Examples were given where temples, libraries and entire cities were destroyed by rulers like Kalinga Maga and Elara. No attempts were made to explain that these destructions were the result of foreign invasions and occupations. This is consistent

with the contents of Buddhist texts and Sinhala-language readers. Social studies texts are better written than these but are too vague in the description of many important concepts and aspects of history, which leads teachers to interpret events in their own biased ways. The downfall of Sinhalese kingdoms was shown exclusively as the result of Tamil attacks.

In this instance, the teacher drew the attention of students to contemporary Sri Lanka and said (in Sinhala) that "they are continuing this destruction even today." The statement was followed by an extensive half-hour discussion of the "atrocities" allegedly committed by Tamils or Tigers. These included actual and purported massacres of Sinhalese in Tamil areas and destruction of sacred Buddhist sites. In an interview later the teacher said that the information regarding the destruction of Buddhist archaeological sites was obtained from Cyril Mathew's publication *Sinhaluni Budu Sasuna Beraganu* ("Sinhalese, Rescue the Buddhist Religion"). Following this discussion, the students earnestly repeated stories that they had supposedly learnt about Tamil atrocities against Sinhalese. These outbursts were emotional in nature and the general consensus among the students and the teacher was that the military and the government were not taking adequate steps to protect the Sinhalese. One of the students suggested that all the Tamils should be rounded up and sent to their homeland in Tamil Nadu. The teacher agreed by saying in Sinhala "*ekanam eththa thamai*" ("that is of course, quite true"). This earnest discussion marked the end of the one-and-a-half hour review session.

Interview with Students of Teacher # 1:

The end of the session marked the beginning of my group interview with the students while the teacher was absent. My first question was that if the Tamils can be sent to Tamil Nadu based on the claim that they originated there, then the Sinhalese also can be sent to the parts of India where they are supposed to have originated. I also suggested that if the Tamils have no rights in Sri Lanka as they are considered the descendants of destructive invaders, then so are the Sinhalese. I mentioned that the *Mahawamsa* itself describes how Vijaya became king of Lanka after defeating (killing) the original inhabitants of Lanka.

The students countered by saying that the Sinhalese were the first to come to Sri Lanka and that they had a "duty" to civilize the Veddas¹⁶ as the Sinhalese were the more advanced people. They also said that the Sinhala language had died out in North India and thus they could not go there even if they wanted, whereas Tamil was still spoken in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lankan Tamils could easily be repatriated.



My argument that Tamils have been in Sri Lanka as long as the Sinhalese, if not longer, was treated as Tamil propaganda. One student suggested that I must have talked to some 'Koti' (Tigers) before coming to talk to them. With peals of laughter the others showed their approval. I also suggested that except perhaps for the first few waves of Sinhalese, all others came from South India and even in the 15th century South Indians from Kerala came to Sri Lanka¹⁷ and became assimilated into the Sinhalese Buddhist mainstream, and currently constitute caste groups like Karawa, Navandanna and Salagama. While this too was considered 'bogus history,' some students from the Navandanna caste insisted that according to their parents all their ancestors have been Sinhalese Buddhists and that they did not have a drop of Tamil blood in their veins.

What surprised me most was their total lack of moderation and the inability to view other interpretations of history in an impartial way. The facts summarized below also transpired at the interviews:

1. Before coming to this class, they had learned certain aspects of Sri Lankan history from other teachers, their parents and kin.
2. The most interesting history lessons have been the ones learnt under the present teacher, mainly because he relates the past to the present.
3. Their most interesting lessons were the ones on Sri Lanka's ancient history because they showed the sacrifices Sinhalese leaders had made to safeguard the land and the nation.
4. Tamils were the cause of problems in ancient Sri Lanka as they are today.

Interview with Teacher # 1:

I considered it best to interview the teacher in the absence of students to give him a better opportunity to express himself without restraint. I reproduce below in translation the relevant portions of the questions I asked and the answers given:

- Q: Do you accept the history lessons you teach as reasonably accurate?
- A: No doubt about it. The texts were written and the curriculum was set up by very eminent people. Besides, I have read the *Mahawamsa*¹⁸ myself which is the most reliable source of our history.¹⁹
- Q: Do you realize that modern research has shown that Tamils could have been in Sri Lanka as long as the Sinhalese and that the most numerous Sinhalese migrations were from South India and not from the north as commonly accepted? Do you know that some Sinhalese caste groups like Navandanna and Salagama came to Sri Lanka in the 15th century from Kerala in South India?

A: Sir, in my 18 years as a teacher and in all my years as a student and as an undergraduate I have never heard such a fairy tale. Sinhalese were the first to come to Sri Lanka; the Tamils came much later, the *Mahawamsa* is quite clear on that point, as are many historians. Sinhalese migrants always came from North India and never from the south. There may have been some intermarriages but no mass migration as you claim. I should know; I have been a history teacher before I started teaching social studies. These theories which you have just put forward are Tamil propaganda and people with a Western-educational background readily accept them (the last statement was a direct attack on myself as well as most contemporary Western-educated social scientists who are commonly referred to as 'thuppahiyas' (derogatory term which usually means "those without a culture"). These scholars have been the vicious targets of Sinhala-educated nationalists for a number of years because their scholarly work has offended Sinhalese chauvinistic sentiments).

Q: Don't you think that the teaching of history as a constant conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils would harm contemporary inter-ethnic relations?

A: We have always had trouble with the Tamils and it will continue until we get rid of them. After all, we have no place else to go and they have Tamil Nadu. Besides whatever the consequences, we have to teach our young people the sacrifices their forefathers made. We have to show them that the sacrifices our police and armed forces are making now are similar to the sacrifices made by the kings Dutugemunu and Vijayabahu I.

Q: Don't you think political negotiations will be better than military action to solve the ethnic conflict?

A: as I always tell my students, it is politics that has ruined us. We must militarily eliminate the Tamil problem. Once they are defeated we can look into their grievances. The problem is they always wanted more than their share. After all we are the majority and we came to this land first.

Q: In addition to history lessons in social studies, do you talk about your views on the ethnic conflict to your students in school and tuition classes?

A: Always. As a teacher it is my duty.

Q: What about other teachers?

A: Of course. As I said before it is their duty.

Q: Some local residents have claimed that you and other teachers incited students to riot against Tamils in 1983 and that some teachers are racist. What do you think?

A: All lies. Marxists and Western-educated *thuppahi* scholars have labeled all patriots as racists. They even call King Dutugemunu and Anagarika Dharmapala racists. I never told students to kill or



harm anybody. We are Buddhists. But if necessary they must fight for their country valiantly as did our great leaders.

Q: So do you think it is alright to influence students the way you want?

A: Yes. It is the duty of a true teacher.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Mattison Mines, Donald Brown, David Brokensha, Margaret Dodd, Gananath Obeyesekere and Anoli Perera for their comments on various versions of this draft.
2. Unless otherwise noted, the proceeding analysis is exclusively based on field research conducted in Lanka during 1988-1989.
3. See the recommendations of the 1981 Special Commission on Religious Education and selected documents of the Centre for Society and Religion.
4. Buddhists believe that soon after his birth the Buddha walked seven steps and on each step a lotus sprang up.
5. Interview conducted in Kandy, Sri Lanka. The Sinhala term *pissu agam* can be translated as 'crazy religions' and the closest translation for *pisso* is 'loonies.'
6. Interview conducted in Kandy, Sri Lanka.
7. See "Justice and Religion in Education", *Logos Publication*, Vol.21,#2, 1982 and the report of the E.L. Wijemanne Religious Committee, *CDN* Jan 14 1982.
8. Lesson 29: p. 92, Polonnaruwa Period (historical background I)/Lesson 30: p. 94, Polonnaruwa Period (historical background II).
9. Sample of 25 teachers from Kandy, Colombo and Matara.
10. Derogatory term for Tamils.

11. Tiger is a term commonly used to describe Tamil guerrillas even though in reality Tigers constitute only one guerilla group, the ultra nationalist LTTE. But the word is now increasingly used to refer to Tamils in general.
12. Sinhalese Buddhist and Christian students in Colombo and Kandy.
13. Of the remaining two, one preferred lessons dealing with geography and the other preferred discussions on economics.
14. 'Tutories' are private classes organised mostly by regular school teachers to coach students in their studies. These classes function during weekends and after regular school hours on weekdays. They have become a major industry in Sri Lanka. Soon after the interviews were conducted these two private tutories also had to close down as a result of JVP intimidation.
15. Altogether, there were two of these sessions per week even when schools were functioning normally. Most secondary school students attend private tutories after school hours whether they need additional help or not. It has become a norm among the school-going population.
16. Indigenous people of Sri Lanka.
17. See Gananath Obeyesekere, 1984, 'Political Violence and the Future of Democracy in Sri Lanka,' in *Sri Lanka, the Ethnic Conflict: Myths, Realities and Perspectives*, Colombo: Committee for Rational Development, Micheal Roberts 1979, *Collective Identities, Nationalisms and Protest in Modern Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Marga Institute, and L.S. Dewaraja, 1988, *The Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka 1707-1782*. Colombo: Lake House Investments Ltd.
18. *Mahawamsa* is a 12th-century document. It intermixes history, myth and legend and has a strong Sinhalese-Buddhist bias.
19. "Our history" means Sinhalese history.