

# NOTES AND COMMENTS

## A New Buddhist Orthodoxy?

The 'Great Debate' began thanks to the Sinhala nationalist English daily, *The Island* (not to be confused with the sanely edited *Sunday Island*). The theme is 'Buddhism Betrayed', which is also a part of the title of a book by Stanley Tambiah. In fact, *The Island* opened the debate when it re-produced a vituperative review of the book *Buddhism Betrayed?*, followed by a number of letters to the editor and comments by columnists decrying Tambiah's purportedly pro-Eelamist propaganda against the Sinhalese race and Buddhism.

This review of Tambiah's book first appeared in a weekly, published by a Sri Lankan expatriate in Los Angeles. The reviewer targets two individuals, Tambiah, the author of the book and Lal Jayawardena, the Director of the Helsinki-based WIDER which had commissioned the study on which the book was based. The underlying argument in the review is a simple and neat one: Tambiah is a Tamil; therefore, he is an Eelamist, and thus an LTTE propagandist. WIDER is a UN-affiliated body; therefore, the UN is pro-Eelam; since Lal Jayawardena is WIDER's director, he has conspired with the expatriate Eelamists to assist in LTTE propaganda. The bottom line of this reasoning is that Buddhism in Sri Lanka is under attack by a world-wide conspiracy!

Conspiracy theories are made of both simple and simplistic logic and aimed at convincing the uninitiated. And they abound in nationalist arguments of all varieties. As Benedict Anderson observes in his *Imagined Communities*, no nationalist ideology needs great thinking; yet it can prepare millions of people to voluntarily enter the slaughter house of nationalist wars.

An amazing thesis that is being made by those angered by Tambiah's book is that the Sinhalese race is in imminent danger of extinction, the innocent but beleaguered and besieged victim of many conspiracies being hatched and executed by all varieties of anti-Sinhala elements. The fear of extinction is so strong among this particular layer of Sinhalese intellectuals that a university Professor of History at a public seminar held at a university appealed to the United Nations to take immediate steps to protect and preserve the Sinhalese nation (*vide Divayina*, November 20, 1993).

Students of Sinhalese nationalist ideology have repeatedly noted a deep-seated sense of insecurity being articulated by Sinhalese-Buddhist intelligentsia, particularly in situations of political disquiet. Some com-

mentators have even characterized Sinhalese nationalism as an ideology of a "majority community with a minority complex."

A few decades ago, a similar fear of extinction was expressed by some Sinhalese intellectuals concerning the Sinhalese language. The argument was a simple, yet effective one; Sri Lanka was the only country in the world where the Sinhalese language—one of the oldest and most glorious languages of the human kind—is being spoken; it was about to disappear from the earth with no proper protection from the state and with no action by genuine lovers of the language. The world would be the poorer for this loss.

The danger of extinction has now been extended to Buddhism. In the course of a campaign against what are called 'unethical conversions', i. e. conversions to Christianity mainly by evangelical missions allegedly by the offer of material incentives, the claim has been made that there is a conspiracy to convert all Buddhists in Sri Lanka to Christianity by the year 2000. We are apparently to be a Christian NIC by the turn of the century!

The two threats are combined by the propagandists. The surest way to destroy the Sinhalese nation, they assert, would be by destroying Buddhism which is really not only its moral foundation but also its *raison d'être*.

While all these may offer excellent raw material for students of nationalism in analyzing the vicissitudes of nationalist politics in Sri Lanka, *Pravada* detects a new Buddhist 'orthodoxy' being defined and established by an urban stratum of Buddhist monks and lay intellectuals who are engaged in Tambiah-bashing. While the contours of this 'new orthodoxy' appear to be still in the making, its basic tenor and essence points to a 'Martial Buddhism', a militant re-appropriation of Buddhism to replace the concept of peace and non-violence with a project of war and conflict. Peace, non-violence and conflict settlement through peaceful means, according to the new doctrine, constitute the 'heresy' (*mithya drushti*).

## What a Footing!

Pooneryn was a tragedy because over 1000 young Sinhalese and Tamil youth in combat uniform were killed in two days, not as a result of snake bites in the jungle or of simultaneous heart-attacks, but facing each other's gun fire. It has evoked a variety of sentiments in the South; grief from those whose kinsmen had been killed, despair and anger from many, and even enhanced



militarism constituted the core of the emotionally charged atmosphere when the news came that the Tigers had achieved a stunning military gain at Pooneryn.

Among the more bizarre political responses to Pooneryn was that of Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, leader of the SLFP and of the Opposition. In a press statement, she made two points: first, the entire country should be placed 'on a war footing' and second, a full time Defence Minister should be appointed to give political leadership and direction to the war.

What exactly is meant by Mrs. Bandaranaike's formulation "placing the country on a war footing?" The twice-Prime Minister of Sri Lanka is not specific; nor does she appear to know the implications of her own demand from the government. But, one should not dismiss what she says for, if implemented, her proposal would have truly horrendous political consequences.

Placing the country on a war footing can have all or some of the following consequences; (a) the re-imposition of emergency regulations in full force, by bringing back provisions that were withdrawn earlier this year, (b) total press censorship, (c) a general war mobilization with compulsory conscription and penalties for draft-dodgers, (d) an enhanced defence levy, (e) induction of military officers into civilian administration, (f) strict implementation of the essential services law, thereby banning all forms of trade union protest, (g) banning of political meetings and protest actions, (h) proscription of political organizations, even of political parties and other organisations that are deemed to endanger national security.

In brief, Mrs. Bandaranaike's proposal entails a semi-martial law administration during which all political activity would cease!

The self-same Mrs. Bandaranaike is reported to be next year's Presidential candidate of the joint opposition.

## Religion and Peace

**T**he Pooneryn tragedy, occurring in the tenth year of Sri Lanka's ethnic war should open the eyes of all religionists in Sri Lanka. After ten years of blood-shed, death and destruction, what can Sri Lanka's religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam—offer to the people as a non-violent option? Virtually nothing. All the Sri Lankan religions have failed this historical test; they have been unable to present a peace-oriented alternative to war. Only a few Christians and a very small number of Buddhists could claim to have worked towards peace.

The tragedy is that some religionists have been propagating war. This, in the name of the country, the race and

the religion itself. If religion is used to counter war with war, as is the case with contemporary Sinhalese Buddhism, it only shows that the intelligentsia of that religion are intellectually and morally impoverished. They have lost their conscience and they want to transform their own 'races' to ones without conscience.

As we have noted elsewhere, this war has produced its own reproductive dialectic. A temporary military gain is interpreted as an unmistakable sign of an imminent all out victory over the LTTE and therefore any talk of a negotiated settlement is seen as 'providing oxygen to dying Tigers.' Similarly, any argument for peace after a military defeat is also interpreted as attempts to destroy the Sinhalese race by enemies within.

Last year a team of Buddhist monks went to Jaffna, describing their visit as a step towards spreading the Buddhist message of peace. No sooner they returned to the South, they were pilloried in the nationalist press; they were branded as 'fifth columnists.' Some intellectuals even went so far as to suggest their expulsion from the sangha order. Early this year, the head of the Anglican Church made a similar visit and returned to Colombo only to realize that the newspaper campaign against his 'act of treachery' was to go on for several months.

How is it that the concept of peace has become such an anathema to some members of the Buddhist sangha and lay Buddhist leaders? This is where the issue of religion in politics comes to the fore. Once politicized, religion ceases to be a religion in the spiritual and moral sense of the term. Politicized religion—whether it is Buddhism, Islam, or Christianity—then becomes a totally secular affair.

The real problem of politicized religion lies with the kind of politics it propagates, and not politics as such. If the religious intelligentsia preaches war to end war, violence against violence and conflict as opposed to resolution, then that intelligentsia drags Sri Lanka towards barbarism and self-destruction.

## New Political Alignments

**A**lthough pushed to the periphery of political debate by the post-Pooneryn developments, the fall-out effects of Anura Bandaranaike's joining the UNP—the enemy camp—continue to gather momentum.

His defection and the warm embrace with which he was received into the UNP have put his own followers in the SLFP in a somewhat awkward position. They cannot follow in their leader's footsteps, because many of the dissident SLFP MPs will not survive politically without anti-UNP rhetoric. They will have no political future, in the SLFP either, because in opposing the Sirimavo-Chandrika faction of the SLFP, they



have qualified to be dropped from the party's electoral lists at the next parliamentary elections.

Therefore, the extreme nationalist parliamentarians of the SLFP, who had remained the main constituency of Anura Bandaranaike —to his credit, he has never been an ardent nationalist—, are making preparations to launch a new political party, a local BJP. The SLFP's businessmen-MP Tilak Karunaratne, whose recent expulsion from the SLFP has been invalidated by the Supreme Court, is the leading campaigner for the emerging Buddhist Jathika Party. Karunaratne has hinted that Gamani Jayasooriya, the leader of the Sinhalese Defence League, would head the new party.

The political columnist of *Aththa*, the Communist Party's popular weekly, has taken not too kindly to the Karunaratne-inspired new party. According to his analysis, the BJP will field a candidate at the next Presidential elections in order to break up the Opposition's vote and thereby ensure the election of the UNP's candidate, D.B. Wijetunga. Such a move by the new Sinhala-Buddhist party cannot be ruled out because, many of its associates have displayed a pathological hatred towards Chandrika Bandaranaike, Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike's daughter and undisputed heir-apparent, after Anura's defection.

Meanwhile, the ruling UNP's coalition with the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) of Minister Thondaman appears to be in a crisis. Disenchanted with the way the UNP

administration has allowed private management companies to run the tea estates and to break promises regarding the welfare of plantation workers, the CWC leadership is rumoured to have been moving towards calling quits to a long relationship with the UNP.

The rumour in Colombo is that a new Opposition political alliance is in the making. The partners to the new configuration are said to be Mr. Gamini Dissanayake's Democratic United National Front (DUNF), the Eelam People's Revolutionary Front (EPRLF) headed by Suresh Premachandran (MP) and Minister Thondaman's CWC. Whether this rumour is true or not, the CWC does not appear to be in a mood to continue its partnership with the UNP. Suggesting an imminent break-up of the UNP-CWC coalition is the motion of no confidence being moved by the Opposition against the UNP Chief Minister of the Central Provincial Council. The CWC is rumoured to have consented to vote with the Opposition against the Chief Minister, thereby bringing down the UNP administration in the Central Province. If this move succeeds, the Uva Provincial Council too, is likely to fall into an opposition-CWC combination.

With elections approaching next year, new alignments are likely to emerge, but they still appear to reflect not current economic and social realities but outmoded and obsolescent shibboleths. One hopes that the proposed merger between the LSSP and the CP will not fall into the same category. **P**

Most religious men I have met are politicians in disguise; I, however, who wear the guise of a politician, am at heart a religious man.

**Mahatma Gandhi**

A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

**Martin Luther King, Jr.**