

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Reforms and Fears

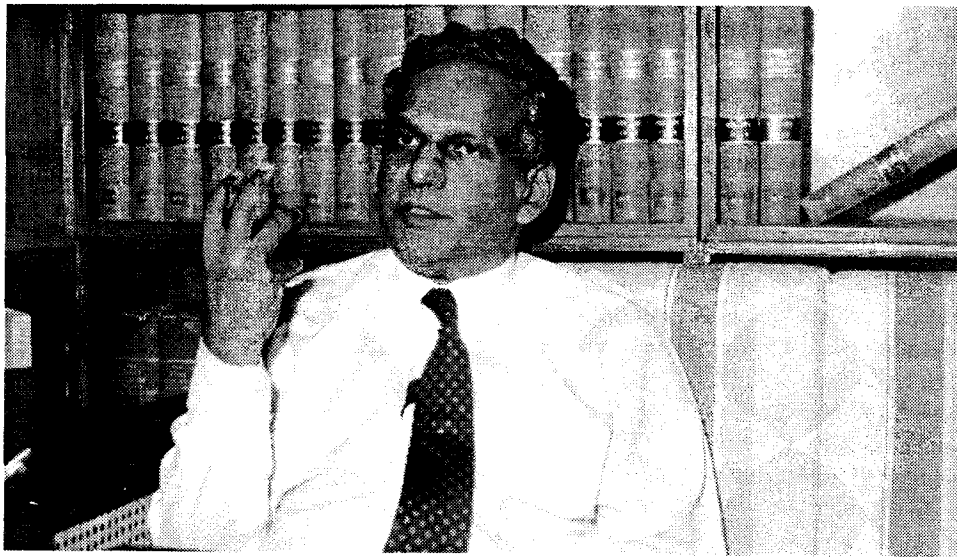
While Sri Lanka's ethnic war has entered its eighteenth year, its impact on society has been hardly studied by scholars. However, there are many indications that the society is engulfed by a psychology of political anomie. What it means is that there is a total breakdown of the political value system that in the past managed to keep Sri Lankan society together.

The controversy surrounding the proposed Equal Opportunity legislation captures some aspects of an inner crisis of Sri Lankan society. This crisis may be termed a 'fear of reform'. The proposed legislation seeks to address the presence of discrimination in public life. Discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, social class, caste and gender has been a major political issue that has produced social unrest and political conflicts in contemporary Sri Lanka. The series of armed insurrections which Sinhalese and Tamil societies have produced since the 1970s have, at their roots, ethnic and social discrimination acutely felt by the younger generation. The breakdown of ethnic relations since independence and the emergence of militant minority politics have also been largely a consequence of discriminatory practices built into state policy. Even the spread of Sinhalese nationalism has had its social bases in subordinate caste communities in Sinhalese society that have experienced discrimination at a variety of levels. The very idea of "equal opportunity" emanates from the recognition that the existing regime of social and ethnic inequality, which has created a system of unequal access to public resources, should be reformed.

Interestingly, the proposed Equal Opportunity Bill has opened up a range of objections from the ethnic and religious majority as well as minorities. The Sinhalese-Buddhist opposition is based on the fear that the equal opportunity legislation would accord new privileges to minorities. The Christian and Muslim opposition emanates from the fear that some of their own privileges may have to be compromised to accommodate Sinhalese-Buddhists. The most emotional objections to the equal opportunity legislation concern the likely impact of the law on educational institutions. For example, would Christian and Buddhist schools, particularly the privileged and elitist ones, have to admit children from other religions and poorer social classes?

While the debate on equal opportunity goes on, the government is likely to present the Bill in parliament, although there is no consensus on it within the government. Some Ministers are reportedly of the view that it is unwise to generate new opposition to government in an election year. Meanwhile, it was reported in the press that when the Cabinet of Ministers discussed the Bill, a heated exchange occurred between Richard Pathirana, Minister of Education, and M. H. M. Ashraff, Minister of Ports who is also the leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. Their sharp disagreements on this issue have also developed into a crisis within the PA coalition.

The initiative for equal opportunity legislation originated in civil society. The late parliamentarian Neelan Tiruchelvam played an active role in conceiving the law, and the accountability bodies, such as the Equal Opportunity Commission, that are to be created through



We dedicate this special issue of *Pravada* to the memory of Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam

legislation. A number of human rights scholars and activists took part in the exercise of initial drafting of the legislation. For the drafting, similar legislation in other countries, notably South Africa and Australia, was also consulted. Then the Ministry of Justice, Constitutional Affairs and National Integration did the finalization of the legislation. In the final Bill, some new features appear to have been introduced, giving certain powers to the Cabinet of Ministers. Even the supporters of the equal opportunity legislation are now worried about what they see as unwarranted powers given to the state in the implementation of the equality policy.

Meanwhile, the public controversy on the equal opportunity legislation demonstrates the complexity of social and political reforms in a society that is going through an acute political crisis. What is ironical is that in a deeply divided society, the very notion of equality is understood in ethnic terms. The ideas of justice, fairness and equality are no longer value-neutral democratic norms that can be ensured through consensus. The elementary democratic principle of equality immediately evokes the question: who gets what and who loses what? And the "who" and "what" in this question refer simply and purely to ethnic communities and ethnic calculations. Even basic reforms in a society with deep ethnic cleavages are not a simple exercise in public policy.

Minorities: a Source of Threat to the Majority ?

One of the most disquieting new developments in Sri Lanka during the past few months has been the anti-minority propaganda, being vigorously carried out by some Sinhalese-Buddhist intellectuals. Extreme ethnic nationalism is of course based on the idea that other ethnic groups are a threat to integrity and survival of one's own ethnic community. Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms are a good case in point. The two nationalisms are predicated on the assumption that one threatens the other. Until this mutual 'threat perception' is laid to rest, reconciliation among the people of the two communities is no easy task.

The new development, meanwhile, concerns Sinhalese-Buddhist and Muslim communities in Sri Lanka. A clever religious propagandist, Rev. Gangodawila Soma, is at the forefront of this new political project. Rev. Soma, who is reportedly an Australian citizen, came back to Sri Lanka last year and started something like a Buddhist revivalist project. Initially, his main concern appeared to be one with a focus on ridding contemporary Buddhism in Sri Lanka of such un-Buddhistic practices as astrology, the worship of Hinduistic deities and of course superstition. In this effort, he appeared to be a combination of Anagarika Dharmapala's bourgeoisification of Sinhalese Buddhism, the purification project of the Vinayawardhana movement and the rationalist Buddhism of E. W. Adikaram. Quite understandably, he developed a supportive constituency among urban middle-class Buddhists who were looking for a kind of rationalist Buddhism with no faith in superstition, deities and such

non-Buddhistic this-worldly saviors as Sathya Sai Baba of India. He at least demonstrated the potential of becoming the messenger of an intellectual Buddhism that emphasized a return to the original precepts and ethics of what is understood in Sri Lanka as *theravada* Buddhism.

Having established a vast constituency of believers through frequent television appearances and preaching ceremonies, Rev. Soma began to dwell on more worldly affairs of politics. One of his recurrent themes of preaching, particularly during the recent months, has been about the supposed threat to the Sinhalese race and Buddhism from Muslims. In his reasoning, the Sinhalese-Buddhists have been declining in population, through birth control and other practices, while the Muslims have been deliberately increasing their numbers. He also alleges that Muslim politicians have been encroaching into the land belonging to Buddhist temples and settling Muslim families on that land, thereby destroying the Sinhalese-Buddhist heritage. One of the Muslim Ministers in the present Cabinet, M. H. M. Ashraff took these allegations so seriously that he had a live television debate with Rev. Soma. Ashraff obviously demolished Rev. Soma's arguments in that debate, but the Buddhist monk continues with his project of spreading anti-minority hysteria with conviction and commitment.

Rev. Soma is not alone in this propagation of the notion that the majority Sinhalese-Buddhists are threatened with extinction. The extremist Sinhalese outfit called the National Movement Against Terrorism has been in the forefront of a campaign, for at least two years, to protect the Sinhalese race from alleged threats from ethnic and religious minorities. The NMAT's sting has been particularly sharp when it comes to the question of Muslims. There have been reports that the NMAT inspired attacks on shops and meat stalls run by Muslim traders. To its political credibility, the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP) has been exposing some of the NMAT's anti-Muslim acts of racist terrorism.

Majority-minority relations in a deeply divided society constitute a delicate affair in balancing ethnic relations. One part of the problem is that political leaders of minority ethnic communities in their utterances and behavior contribute to the majoritarian hysteria. The LTTEs behaviour in massacring, on many occasions, large numbers of innocent Sinhalese civilians, has given credence to the belief among the Sinhalese, that the Tamils are out to destroy the Sinhalese race and its survival in a hostile world. Some political leaders of the plantation Tamil community have repeatedly contributed, through their words and actions, to reinforcing the idea that the plantation Tamils have a hidden political agenda to set up their own area of sovereignty. Some Muslim political leaders have also contributed to this growing chasm between the Sinhalese majority and the minority ethnic communities. Both majoritarian and minoritarian politics have been equally responsible for the majority-minority cleavages that are growing in Sri Lanka at present. Democratization of Sri Lanka's politics requires de-ethnicization of the political world view.

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