

# THE NGO BOGEY

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**I**t is ironic that those speaking up for peace, devolution, human rights, pluralism and democracy have been branded foreign agents, traitors and corrupt persons. Recent attacks on the NGOs show that the popular ways to hit opponents is to shout 1) foreign conspiracy! 2) foreign money! 3) foreign religion and ideology! 4) fraud! 5) immorality! and 6) treason! This seems to have been an old well-tried formula coming to us from colonial times. Over the past one hundred years, independent groups challenging foreign rule, class oppression and discrimination against minorities and women have been subject to harassment, respectively, by British rulers, employers, Sinhala extremists, and male chauvinists. It is worth recalling the past when we are faced today with hysteria in the press and elsewhere against those voluntary associations dumped together as NGO's, "non-government organisations".

Among the early NGOs was the Buddhist Theosophical Society (BTS) which pioneered the movement for Buddhist education in the late 19th century. The BTS received contributions from persons in Europe, the US and Australia and one of Colonel Olcott's important missions was fund-raising abroad for local Buddhist causes. This was mainly because the local bourgeoisie could not come up with adequate funding for such projects.

One of the first to face criticism was Anagarika Dharmapala the ideologue of the Buddhist revival who was funded by an American Theosophist Mary Foster. She lived in Hawaii and was an heiress by birth and marriage to shipping fortunes; she met Dharmapala in 1893, and in later years lavishly donated large sums of money to the Maha Bodhi Society started by Dharmapala, and to his many Buddhist projects in London and Calcutta. Mary Foster was frequently referred to by Dharmapala as his "dear Foster mother." Dharmapala was however often taunted by his Sinhala opponents - who kept calling for his accounts. The British also hit back with sexual innuendo; in 1915 the Inspector General of Police, Herbert Dowbiggin alleged that Dharmapala and many of his foreign Theosophist friends were homosexual and therefore had "disordered minds". It was around these years too that the leaders of the Ceylon National Congress were referred to as "low caste agitators" and "a set of skunks" by the British authorities.

The trade union and Left movements have also been the targets of smears and harassment over the decades. In the 1920s the Ceylon Labour Union led by A.E.Goonesinha used small pots (*mutti*) to gather money (*kasi*) from the public to finance strikes. Goonesinha's opponents alleged that he enriched himself with "*mutti kasi*" and ever since, trade union leaders have been subject to allegations that they are "*mutti-kasi karayas*" enriching themselves on the working class.

Another persistent story was that trade union and Left politicians lived the 'high life' on foreign money received from Moscow and Beijing. Their life styles were attacked and "whisky-drinking Trotskyists" became a common diatribe directed at LSSP leaders, over the past decades. In addition, the accusation has been that alien ideologies such as socialism and Marxism were imposed on the working class by Left leaders trained in the West.

Other popular targets for vilification have been the Sri Lanka feminist organizations active from the 1970s onwards. Ten years ago there were headlines denouncing these groups as receivers of foreign funds, promoters of Western feminism and supporters of terrorists. Today women's organisations are often represented in the press as sinister "NGOs" and their leading activists and researchers are subject to obscene slanders, mud-slinging as well as snide comments on their foreign education, behaviour, dress and morality.

Intolerant persons have often tried to create panic among the Buddhist public - which fortunately is often more advanced than the chauvinist ideologues. One recalls the vilification in the Sinhala press of Dr.G.P.Malalasekera in 1950 over a proposed film of the life of the Buddha; the abuse heaped on Martin Wickremasingha's novel based on the Buddha's life, and the furor created by Buddhist organizations in the 1980s over Mahayana Buddhist activities in Sri Lanka.

The other much used bogey to promote panic among non-Christians has been the "Christian conspiracy" and the representation of Christianity as a "western" religion. In earlier years it was Catholic Action, now fundamentalist born-again Christians are targeted for unfair conversions. In 1995 newspapers have wrongfully and maliciously attacked local Christians and the Christian clergy as unpatriotic, foreign agents, and as supporters of the LTTE. This has reached ridiculous proportions and the *Divaina* (27/12/95) sought to create a stir with the news that many distinguished Sri Lankan human rights activists and even the UN General Secretary, Boutros Boutros Ghali, are Christians - as if that is a punishable offence and as if Christianity meant treachery.

It is not a coincidence that the wave of hysteria about NGOs that engulfed sections of the press and public opinion and even some officials of the government in the last weeks of November 1995 ran parallel to the military successes of the Sri Lankan army in Jaffna. Situations of war tend to make people emotional and fearful. They also provide an occasion for chauvinists and nationalists to get worked up against "foreign conspiracies" and local "treason". The Sinhala chauvinists who had kept their opinions muted and heads low after their electoral defeat in 1994, not only came out to defame

their opponents in the press but also took to the streets with racist banners resorting to intimidation and violence.

Why is it possible 50 years after colonial rule to raise cries of foreign money, alien ideology and a Western way of life especially at a time when all governments try to attract foreign money, and when the people have modernized their dress and life styles? The reason is that it is the cheapest trick in the book to invoke "Imperialism" about which people have strong feelings and to abuse one's opponents as agents or running dogs of imperialism. In most parts of South Asia, this pretext is still used to stifle criticism. Human rights which are universal, become "Western" (one of the most ludicrous of all excuses); comment by human rights groups in Sri Lanka become treacherous action (by those who work for "dollars") and comment by foreign human rights groups becomes "interference" in the internal affairs of the country.

Those who use such absurd arguments forget that it was local human rights, womens' rights and ethnic rights groups who over the years, especially during the worst state repression, in the 1980s, exposed the many violations of the peoples' rights that occurred in Sri Lanka. It is because of such revelations that changes have been made and that governments have taken note of the voice of the people which is so frequently expressed through voluntary organisations, namely NGOs.

It is perhaps inevitable that NGOs challenging human rights violations get on the nerves of the powers that be, that those questioning women's subordinate status have to face ridicule and abuse from patriarchs and that those standing up for the rights of minorities are branded traitors.

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