

Compendium of invaluable information

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POLITICS: Batty Weerakoon in an analytical introduction to this publication examines S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's response to the fifty-fifty demand of Tamil leader G.G. Ponnambalam. Ponnambalam demanded there should prevail equality of representation among the Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, Malays and Burghers.

The British exploited this division among communities to prevent domination by the Sinhalese and allowed no community Sinhalese or Tamils to gain their aspirations but gave room to exercise a policy of divide and rule. Bandaranaike felt it was better to settle differences among Sri Lankans without calling outsiders to settle them.

Weerakoon moves to a hastily set up coalition as the answer to Bandaranaike in the forming of the United National Party, a coalition of the bourgeois and petty bourgeois. This hastily assembled unity was to obtain Domination Status and exclude Marxists.

The aim in forging communal unity, according to Bandaranaike, was first to unite the Sinhalese and then win over the confidence of Ceylonese communities to threaten reactionaries in Sri Lanka and imperialism and exploitation by non-Ceylonese.

J.R. Jayewardene in May 1944 meanwhile had moved in the State Council to work towards making Sinhalese gradually the official language in the Island. Nalliah representing Trinco-Batticaloa added that Tamil should also be adopted as an official language and the State Council accepted it Bandaranaike ironically observed that no harm lay in recognizing Tamil too as an official language to bring about amity and confidence among communities.

Weerakoon shifts to 1955 when N.M. Perera proposed to amend the constitution to enable Sinhalese and Tamil to be made State languages with parity in the Island. This accorded with the State Council resolution of 1944. But the political environment had changed. Bandaranaike quit the UNP in 1951 and fathered the Sri Lanka Freedom Party while Tamil leadership too was divided and a Federal Party was formed. Now the scene was set for the two sides of the ethnic divide to follow extremist positions.

Only the political left of the Lanka Sama Samajist and the Communists now advocated Sinhalese and Tamil as official languages. Bandaranaike tried to find a middle way by giving due recognition to Tamil while Sinhalese remained the official language. According recognition to Tamil in administration and establishing regional Councils were agreed in a Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact. In July 1958 he moved the Tamil Language (Special Provision Bill) in Parliament.

But by September 1959 while Bandaranaike was still working on a compromise to satisfy Tamils he was assassinated. With this tragedy ended the creation of Provincial or Regional Councils by the SLFP. Thereafter "the tortuous course" the language issue took confirmed the worst fears of Tamils about majoritarianism.

Yet with the Dudley Senanayake government of 1965 the Tamils settled for decentralization of powers through district councils, a principal element in the Dudley-Chelvanayakam Pact. To facilitate arrangements Thiruchelvam of the Federal Party was made Minister of local Government. Nevertheless again the UNP too failed owing to the impediments of Premadasa, Deputy Minister of Local Government.

Since then, according to Batty Weerakoon, the Federal party failed the Tamils. It ignored the Left and cooperated with right wingers. The FP lost a chance to present a viable proposal to the Constituent Assembly in the seventies.

The FP turned Tamil United Liberation Front supported the UNP. But unfortunately the UNP after the 1977 election success did not provide even for decentralization argues Weerakoon. Instead J.R. Jayewardene challenged the TULF: if you want war let there be war. If you want peace let there be peace.

Around this time N.M. Perera commented on the 1978 UNP constitution. He admitted that the 1972 constitution did not go far enough on language even to satisfy sober elements in the Tamil Community. N.M. Perera conceded the section in the 1978 Constitution on language as progressive. But by then young Tamil extremists demanded a separate State. Concession on language came late. New concessions like regional autonomy became indispensable.

J.R. Jayewardene's UNP came to such a position ten years later, only with the 13th Amendment providing Provincial Councils. A rational response to this question is now being considered by the UNP and SLFP driven by the imperative to exist as a single nation. The principle of devolution was granted but alas the UNP paid heed to the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna, upset the settlement arguing that the country would get divided. And by then the Liberation Tigers of Tamil

Ealam was on its quest.

The foreword by authors Wesley Muthiah and Sydney Wanasinghe contains vital and invaluable documents sedulously and intelligently culled from speeches of pontifical stature in the LSSP to place in a proper perspective the stand of the LSSP on the acrimonious official language issue which brought in train protracted communal cleavage in the Island.

The LSSP founded on 18 December 1935 in its first manifesto itself prominently pronounced that one should utilize the vernaculars; Sinhalese and Tamils in lower Courts of Law and statements recorded in police stations and extended the use to government offices.

Thus, so early the LSSP took a position to accord equality of status to the two indigenous languages. Again on July 23rd 1936 Sama Samajists introduced motions in the State Council about the use of the local languages in Police Courts and lower education. The LSSP was steadfast on giving parity of status to Sinhalese and Tamils officially.

Thereafter the two authors of the volume have diligently and intelligently laboured to choose appropriate, helpful and vital statements in Parliament and out, and writings of the LSSP followers to prove their adherence to the two language policy.

But election on the North and South showed that Tamil voters never reciprocated appreciatively. For instance, at one stage Colvin R. de Silva pertinently questioned, "Do our people want a single nation or do we want two nations" when government continued to cling onto the one official (Sinhalese) language obstinately through the years.

If the Tamils with their own particular language and traditions are denied the right to use their language with government or courts or school then a new nationality will emerge and government will be forced to grant more claims. Colvin added that statehood demands to give generously instead of being niggardly till too late.

In another invaluable document the Lanka Sama Samaja Party in a declaration on the state language question affirmed that it always espoused the administration in Sinhalese and Tamil which are languages of the vast majority in Sri Lanka.

The debate and exchange so carefully garnered from the Parliamentary House of representative records furnish a fertile field for study researchers and concerned readers of politics in Sri Lanka and of special interest is the record of the debates in the House of Representatives in June on disturbances in Amparai which had to be quelled with inducted police and military officers when the reviewer of this book while on a research project in Gal Oya Valley.

It is striking that a long controversy had arisen in the course of the parliamentary debate on the word "parity" between parties with no avail to alleviate the hardship of the Tamils with one official language alien to them. They were outlawed from the Ceylonese community more or less.

Other important principal documents are extracts from the Hansard-debate on the "throne" speech where Colvin R. de Silva adds, "only a Lanka Sama Samaja Party government can lead the country toward racial harmony, to the ending of communal disorders" and to economic development that will raise living standards of Ceylonese. V. Karalasingham discussed in a document "The way out for the Tamil speaking People" stressing that fraternal unity can come in Ceylon only with a leftist dispensation.

The language question is principally focused upon. A letter of Bernard Soysa, Sama Samajist leader of 3rd February 1993 aptly pinpoints the Island's ethnic crisis and how it could be ended with equal and fair dialogue between the Tamil minority's belligerents too and the Sinhalese majority on vexed issues. Both editors of this remarkably readable book on a tragedy that has afflicted Sri Lanka over the years are a compendium of invaluable, edifying information. It should be indispensable to students of politics, history and economics specially but all interested in the Island should profit much from reading it. The Editors call for commendation. It is good to be wise ever late as they imply.

Two languages one nation - one language two nations

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