

## **AN OPEN LETTER TO THE PRIME MINISTER**

**Title: BUDDHISM UNDER THE M.E.P.**

**By L.H. Mettananda**

**Date: 1956**

Sir,

Three months have elapsed since the “landslide” election in April this year, acclaimed both in this country and other parts of world as the passing of a period, raised you to the pre-eminent position of Prime Minister.

1. It would be recalled that of the several factors that may have contributed to this event, it was recognised in all quarters that the report of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry (known as the Buddhist Commission Report) and the part played by the Bhikkhus in bringing its contents to the knowledge of the Buddhist public were decisive factors that helped to elevate you and your party into power.
2. At the same time, it is not a fact that will easily fade out of the minds of the Buddhists of Ceylon that for at least the last fifteen years you have consistently professed that you will avow their cause. You have in unmistakable terms accepted that great wrongs have been done to the Buddhist Community under colonial rule and expressed your impatience at the tardy manner in which the U.N.P. was attempting to provide redress. It was not surprising therefore that almost the entire Buddhist Community accepted without question the guarantee that you and your party gave in your election manifestos and from public platforms that the implementation of the Buddhist Commission’s recommendations will be a matter of first concern to you and your party if you were returned to power.
3. I am sure that I need not remind you of Clause 3 of the Election Manifesto of the M.E.P. issued in Sinhalese on 10th March, 1956 which reads thus: (We accept the recommendations of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry).

You must also be aware that you pledged yourself in writing to give effect to the Ten-Point Programme of the Eksat Bhikshu Peramuna, the third Point of which reads thus: (to implement the recommendations of the Buddhist Commission Report).

It was in the expectation that your promises will be fulfilled that such magnificent receptions were given to you by the Buddhists during your last election campaign.

4. If you have forgotten these, at least, one fact must stand vividly in your memory, and that is the mammoth meeting of Bhikkhus and Buddhist laymen held at the Town Hall on 6th March, 1956 when you sat in public on the platform at the feet of Bhikkhus and solemnly undertook in the presence of that vast gathering of over 3,000 Bhikkhus that you would, if entrusted with the Government of the country, restore to Buddhism its rightful place in the land, as guaranteed by the Kandyan Convention of 1815 and confirmed, as you said, by the Proclamation of 1818.
5. It was this undertaking made in public and in a most solemn manner after you had taken pansil, and accepted by the bhikkhus without question in view of the assurance you have for several years given the Buddhist Community - that sent out the Bhikkhus in thousands to call upon the Buddhist voters to exercise their vote, making the Buddhist question the most important issue at the election. Very nearly the entire body of Bhikkhus with the exception only of the ecclesiastical stooges of the United National Party - such as the thrice - born Brahmins of Malwatte, jealous of their feudal privileges and other vested interests, exhorted every Buddhist to do his duty to his country and religion by casting his vote for the Mahajana Eksat Peramuna.

You, who had been so utterly despondent of your own fortunes at the election as to rush into a no contest pact with the Marxist Parties, suddenly had your breath taken away on the morning of the 6th April by the sweeping victory of the M.E.P. and completed on the eleventh by almost unbelievable victories of the second and third days' polling. The wave of Buddhist feeling that was originated by the Buddhist Commission Report and rising to a head at the Town Hall meeting of the 6th March swept you into power with an outright majority of 52 members of your own party, when during the campaign you had gone from place to place praying that you should be returned with at least 35 candidates.

6. The Buddhist Community rightly expected that immediate steps would be taken by you to fulfil your pledges by implementing the Buddhist Commission recommendations. But, the events of the first three months of your regime have only provided the people with sufficient indications that a second and a more shameful betrayal of Buddhism is gradually taking place under your Government. I state below some of the reasons for my statement.
  - i. In the Speech from the Throne which was the most important declaration of policy made by your Government there was a singular absence of any mention of the recommendations of the Buddhist Commission Report.

- ii. There is a belief prevailing in Buddhist circles that at a meeting between yourself and the Roman Catholic Archbishop you gave an undertaking to him that the recommendations of the Buddhist Commission Report relating to the control and provision of education will not be implemented by your Government. Those recommendations are of vital importance for the emancipation of the Buddhist child.

This belief has been further strengthened by your statement at the recent Prize Giving at St. Bridget's Convent that your children are better Buddhists than yourself because they attend a Roman Catholic institution. I do not question the remark you make about yourself remembering as I do that it was your demand in the State Council that children attending schools belonging to religions other than their own should not be paid state grants in order to discourage such practice, but your inference that the proper place for the education of a Buddhist child is a Roman Catholic institution must come as a rude shock to all Buddhists.

It was the finding of the Buddhist Commission Report that under the U.N.P. regime political Catholicism was getting a grip upon the Government through key positions being filled by Roman Catholics. While preserving appointments like those of the Commanding Officers of the Army and Navy, you have completed this policy by removing the Buddhist Secretary of the Treasury and Head of the Public Service Mr. L.J.de S Seneviratne and replacing him by Mr S F Amarasinghe, a staunch Roman Catholic. If you considered Mr. L J de S Seneviratne as the most suitable person for the post of Commissioner of the Official Language Department, and desired to give him the best chance of carrying out his work successfully, you would have realised that there would have been a greater chance of his accomplishing his work with speed and efficiency, had he remained the Head of the Public Service while performing the duties of the new post at the same time.

The recent attempt to discredit the Buddhist Inspector General of Police, we fear, is the forerunner to placing a Catholic at the Head of this important Department as well.

- iii. You will remember that long before the elections, the country regarded with disgust those who professed to be leaders of the people and yet haunted cocktail parties and nightclubs and by their example helped to introduce the more pernicious aspects of western life among our people. The Buddhist Commission Report called upon the Government to use its powers to stem this decay

in social life.

I should have expected therefore at least in the selection of your ministers you would be discreet enough to choose such persons as would serve to restore a better sense of values in the minds of the people than your predecessors in office were able to.

I am, however, dismayed that for the most important post in your cabinet, viz that of the Minister of Finance you have selected one who is a great patron of the more decadent features of western life.

This gentleman, who strangely enough is himself a Roman Catholic, contrary to all rules of collective responsibility makes utterances against the Buddhist Commission recommendations which you have pledged your written word to implement.

For example, he denies that Government has not in any manner expressed any intention of discontinuing the services of religious nursing sisters. I wonder how this utterance fits in with recommendation 26 of the Buddhist Commission Report.

An important section of the Buddhist Commission Report was devoted to ways and means of raising the living standards of the people (vide ch.7). The recent Budget of the Minister of Finance instead of creating more avenues for employment and production locally of the important needs of the people, was more concerned about cheaper cosmetics for women who make looks their main concern in life, and reduced the duties on these articles, which the U.N.P. had increased some years ago.

- iv. On the very first day that you cabinet met, it made the declaration that liquor will not be served at the two Houses of Parliament, at State functions, at foreign embassies and at Sravasti. Subsequently you issued a circular that liquor could be served at foreign embassies. Liquor continues to be served at the two Houses of Parliament and the doings at Sravasti of M.Ps and Ministers under the influence of liquor are outraging the feelings of the people.

The Prohibition Commission as composed at present has not a single Buddhist Member and we gather from the local Press that the new Chairman is hostile and rude to Bhikkhus and other witnesses who appear in favour of prohibition before the Commission.

- v. In February 1955 the U.N.P. decided to enforce prohibition and ban horse racing. Since that decision was made local options were held for closing of taverns and not for opening them. Your Minister for Home Affairs has started local options for the opening of taverns closed by your predecessor's Government. Why your Minister of Home Affairs should do this against recommendation No.23 of the Buddhist

Commission Report and also while a Prohibition Commission is actively engaged in preparing a report on the total prohibition of liquor is not what we Buddhists can understand.

- vi. The Minister of Finance under U.N.P. accepted the recommendations of the Taxation Commission regarding the taxation of the earned incomes of religious bodies, a measure devised to prevent the loss to revenue through exemption from income tax, profits tax, excess profits tax, and death duties of property and business undertakings of religious bodies now exempted completely from these taxes. Your Government has maintained a complete silence over this question which was the subject of a special recommendation of the Buddhist Commission Report.
- vii. You have on numerous occasions told the people of this country that the special gift that Ceylon has to give to the world is the gift of Buddhism. One such occasion in recent times you cannot have yet forgotten, and that was your last Buddha Jayanthi lecture on Buddhism at Royal College. You are aware that the Commercial Radio today spreads to the world Catholic propaganda. Your Minister for Posts, Broadcasting and Information rightly stopped the use of a service meant to help trade, for the purpose of spreading the Gospel. If any religious broadcasts are put over the Commercial Radio which reaches the whole world, I should think that it should be only Buddhist broadcasts, i.e. if your solemn words are to be matched by the acts on the part of your Government. But your Minister has re-introduced Catholic broadcasts, and I presume these are the glad tidings that Ceylon has to give the world in Buddha Jayanti year.
- viii. Your Minister of Labour has expressed an intention to introduce a five day week. The Sabbath I presume still remains as a holiday, for your Minister for Finance gave that assurance. You and the rest of the Cabinet have now forgotten the recommendation of the Buddhist Commission about giving a (monthly) holiday on Poya Days, so that the Buddhists may have a day that they could devote to their religious matters. This, like other recommendations, has I presume been conveniently forgotten.
- ix. It has been the finding of the Christian Missionary Activities Enquiry Committee appointed by the Madhya Pradesh Government of India. "The large influx of foreign missionaries is undesirable and should be checked....."

Evangelisation in India appears to be a part of the uniform world policy to revive Christendom for re-establishing western supremacy and is not promoted by spiritual motives. The objective is apparently to create Christian minority pockets with a view to disrupting the solidarity of the non-Christian societies." See The Hindu, July 18th, 1956.

In Ceylon, on the other hand, the door is open for more and more foreign missionaries to enter. Strangely garbed Hungarian Catholic nuns in grey sarees on bicycles and lacking in anything like religious demeanour are frequent sights on the streets of Colombo and its suburbs, using their influence on the people. One should like to know why and how these persons are given entry permits into our country.

- x. While the vital problems of this country which were inadequately dealt with by the past Government remain yet unconsidered, and there yet is a very large population that voted for you in the expectation that your Government will take such steps as are urgently needed to ensure that every man in the country gets at least one square meal a day and medical attention, when he is ill, still suffering from the direst forms of poverty, you have made globe trotting and international affairs your chief concern. Your predecessor chased the same chimera and tried to be a world figure. You remember how the people of this country regarded him at the last election.

Your recent triumph of taking over the British bases in Ceylon was characterised as a Pyrrhic victory . It has no doubt given a good deal of satisfaction to Comrades N.M.Perera and Peter Keunaman, who only wish to see Ceylon in difficulties, but I wonder whether it has pleased anyone else. You know that the British are spending over Rs. 300,000,000 annually on the Trimcomalee base, and employ as many as 10000 Ceylonese. What may I ask was the haste to get rid of these bases, before you could have planned out the economy of the country. We see in these great exploits upon the international stage, only an attempt to walk on tiptoe as your predecessor did.

- xi. It is well known that a certain foreign power has been carrying on intrigues in this country, and is spending large sums of money to finance the Vinaya Wardene Society which is directed against the Sangha. You are now about to invite the Communist powers, perhaps in the hope of courting the support of Comrades Perera and Keunaman in Parliament. They are people who openly denounce religion as the opium of the people. The Communist powers whose affection you seek will offer you tempting baits like short term trade proposals and even aid and expert advice to lead this country gradually away from your Middle Path. What a hot-bed of intrigue and clash of conflicting interests Ceylon is going to be soon!

I have perhaps stated enough to show how far you and your Government has drifted away not only from what you promised - but more important than that - even from the vital issues of this country. If any further proof is wanted, the first Budget presented by your Finance Minister whose financial advice, as far as I can judge, comes from those who haunt the well-known Atlanta Night Club. How else can one explain the fact that

the best he had to offer in his Budget was a reduction of the duty on cosmetics, cars, jam, butter, foreign toys and other articles, which nine tenths of the voters who cast their votes for you never get a chance of using. The irony of the whole matter is that while you reduced the tax on cars you retained the high duty on bicycles which the poor workers use to get to their work every day.

You are now getting ready to spend the next three weeks at great cost to the country in the discussion of something that only betrays the incompetence of those responsible for it. Even without all this costly fanfare this year's Budget is assured a name in history as the "Cosmetic Budget".

You have seen one bad set, that tried to make the Buddhists fry in their own fat by preaching to them tolerance, getting discredited by the country. History has an unfortunate way of repeating itself. The Buddhists of this country should like to see less of the masquerading in cloth and banian for their benefit, less empty words however well strung they may be, but, instead, an honest and sincere effort to keep promises made and to fulfil your duties as Prime Minister to a people who have suffered long and bitterly under the foreign yoke, and hailed your victory as the passing of a dark period in their history.

Yours sincerely,

L.H. Mettananda