

METTANANDA: SPOKESMAN OF THE NEW LAYERS

30/3/55

Faith in a Swabasha future

'FIVE-SIXTHS OF OUR TALENT UNTAPPED'

by Our Lobby Correspondent

THERE ARE ROUGHLY TWO SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT IN CEYLON TODAY. THE NOTHING-CAN-BE-DONE SCHOOL AND THE SOMETHING-MUST-BE-DONE SCHOOL.

To the old school, that is the former, belong the prophets of doom who predict an awful fate for the Ceylonese race, the dismal economist jimmies who for the past ten years have forecast our imminent bankruptcy, the pessimists who just wag their heads and say "Tchh, tchh."

Such people discount the possibility of a decent life hereafter — at least in this blighted world. They are the Brown Establishment—the precious people who went to the right schools, married into the right families, got the right jobs but were born to the wrong age. And so much the worse for the age.

I had a long talk with L. H. Mettananda — who belongs to the Something - must-be-done School—about the new social layers that are springing up to replace these disgruntled people.

Mr. Mettananda is not a politician. He is a private citizen and he values his privacy. "I don't like to talk about myself," he said. "I live my own life." But his whole attitude typifies the New Optimism.

Indeed he is a jump ahead of the Something-must-be-done School. He believes in the philosophy of Do-it-yourself.

New Layers

The New Layers we spoke about are the Swabasha-educated youth of the country. Will they be well enough equipped to meet the challenge of the future? "The question is an insult to the intelligence of over one and a half million Sinhalese-speaking children of this

country," said the outspoken Mr. Mettananda.

"They constitute five-sixths of the talent of this country. They are sprung from the people with their roots deep in the soil. They are in close touch with their physical surroundings and they are alive to the pains and tribulations of the people."

That can scarcely be doubted by anyone who knows and understands the grinding privations of the underprivileged in a cruel climate. They—the New Layers—are drawn chiefly from village or central schools. They have faced the miseries of the lower middle class, the obstacles of inherited prejudice, the spectre of unemployment.

Can be done

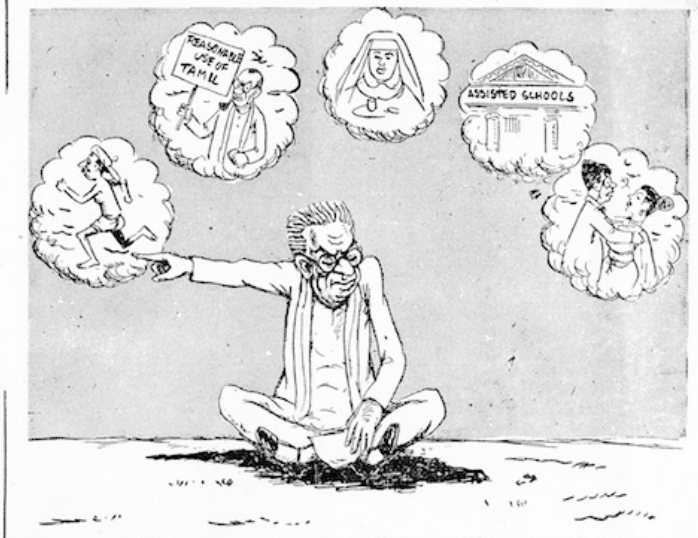
Mr. Mettananda knows all about these things. He himself was a principal of two underprivileged schools, Ananda and Dharmaraja, at a time when they were not considered quite the "right" schools. It is different today.

He had faith in the future of these schools — as much as he has faith today in the future of the Swabasha-educated youth of Ceylon.

"Necessity is the mother of invention," said the spokesman of the New Layers. "All they want is modern knowledge through the medium of the language that is intimately bound up with their whole system of habits in thought and in feeling. That is, they want modern knowledge in Swabasha."

THOUGHTS OF METTA

by WIJESOMA



in Swabasha? Mr. Mettananda has not the slightest doubt that it will be.

"As a result of the recent agitation, we have at the moment an adequate supply of Sinhalese textbooks in Science and Mathematics up to the SSC stage," he said.

"Schools like Ananda and Nalanda have successfully taught Science and Mathematics in swabasha up to this stage.

"What these schools have done, other schools can do. It is a duty that the Government owes to the students who studied science and mathematics in Sinhalese to give them all the facilities to continue in the same medium up to more advanced stages."

Mr. Mettananda said the pace at which swabasha textbooks in Science and technological subjects have to be provided was set five years ago.

In 1957 we saw an adequate supply up to the SSC stage; in 1958-59 we should reach the University Preliminary Second Year stage;

In 1960-62 we should complete the supply of textbooks for the First Degree course.

"Should this programme be tampered with," he said, "those

who organise the education of our youth for these stages will be held responsible."

Blazed trail

Mr. Mettananda believes that "those who blaze the trail and those who are law-abiding" deserve all encouragement. As for supplementing their knowledge by means of books written in other languages, the students themselves could be trusted to find the answers.

Mettananda, the Educationist, retired from the principalship of Ananda in 1955, after pioneering what must now be recognised even by his bitterest opponents as the most successful experiment to date in the switch-over to swabasha. Mettananda the Optimist is convinced that this brave experiment will go from strength to strength. He pins his hopes on the many hundreds of thousands whose education and skill are unused in a country which desperately needs scientists and technicians.

Says he: "The teaching of science and mathematics in Sinhalese has made it possible to develop five times as many human talents as

are available for the English medium.

"The sources of their strength and their equipment have hitherto not been tapped. They are therefore well prepared to meet the challenge of the future—at any rate without inviting armies of foreign experts."

Had their day

Everyone in Ceylon, of course, is worried about the future of assisted schools—everyone, that is, except the millions who can never hope to go to them.

Mr. Mettananda's views on the subject are fairly well known, but they will bear repetition in the present context. He said:

"Assisted schools have had their day. They were established and maintained in the interests of the managing body. The managing body selected pupils of its denomination, or pupils who could be converted, or pupils of rich parents."

"As long as assisted schools remain, discrimination in educational provision will remain. Therefore they must be taken over without payment of any compensation. The State alone can undertake the distribution

of educational facilities on a proportionate population basis." "What about Free Education then? Has it not lowered our standards of learning?"

Mr. Mettananda poured scorn on the whole idea. "Free education is the greatest blessing this country has got since the people's representatives entered the legislature," he said. "Yes, free education like the broad highway should be free to all and sundry."

"All this talk of free education 'lowering standards' is a pure invention of managers who run schools for children of PUKKA SAHIBS, to ridicule the extension of educational facilities to all citizens."

His words were harsh with righteous indignation against the power of school managers and their partiality for power politics. And yet, he was anxious for me to understand their motives for seeking to maintain things as they are.

Quiet faith

"As a matter of fact," declared Mr. Mettananda, "owing to free education, children who would never have seen the inside of an university are now studying there in increasing numbers. At present as many as 35 per cent. of university students are village boys and girls." "That was certainly a significant revelation. And perhaps it underlines the quiet, unshakable faith of men like Mettananda."

He struck me as a man of integrity, education and vision — but with a blind spot somewhere in his make-up. What that blind spot is, it is difficult to say.

Perhaps it is religion. And, ironically, it is the blind spot also of the upholders of missionary education. Mr. Mettananda was largely responsible for the Buddhist Commission's Report, and it was on the MEP promise to implement the recommendations of this report that he gave his support to the present governing party.

But he says he belongs to no political party. He gives his advice free to anyone who wants it. In the early days of MEP rule he attracted considerable public notice by addressing a series of Open Letters, chiefly to the Prime Minister.

They were among the most widely read documents at the time — almost apocalyptic in style, they specialised in sharp specific accusations. They were powerful without being pontifical, provocative without being loose and made it very clear to Judge by subsequent events a profound impression on the political afterthoughts of the MEP coalition.