

L. H. Mettananda: Leader of a Buddhist revival

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Mr. Lokosatu Hew Mettananda, educationist, humanist, nationalist and Buddhist Revivalist was born at Kaluduwadumulla in Ambalangoda this day, exactly one hundred years ago. He passed away in Colombo on 1st November, 1967 at the age of 73.

Mr. Mettananda indeed was a remarkable man. He was a rare type of leader, unassuming, selfless, fearless, simple in his life-style and Kalyana Mitra (a good friend) to all who came to associate with him. Above all he was a man of unblemished character. He possessed all those qualities of a good leader.

I first came to know him in the early 1940 when he was the Principal of Dharmaraja College, Kandy. I was then attached to the Kandy Kachcheri. The Kandy Drama Circle staged a historical play written by me in aid of the college. Mr. Mettananda used to come to the college hall near Sri Dalada Maligawa now and again to watch the actors practising. I was greatly impressed by his Roman Senator like personality.

A member of the cast and an old boy of the college with whom I became friendly told me how before Mr. Mettananda became the principal of the college, there was a division not only among the members of the staff, not only among the old boys but also among the benefactors of the college who were some of the leading Buddhists in Kandy; the division being due to the low-country up-country feelings of the two parties.

Mr. Mettananda by his non-partisan, judicious and diplomatic approach to the problem, was able to bring about a reconciliation between the two warring factions. Throughout his stay in Kandy he was in friendly and cordial terms with the leaders of the two parties.

I began to associate with him closely when he was the Principal, Dharmaraja College, Kandy.

Inquiry

The All Ceylon Buddhist Congress at its Annual Sessions held at Kegalle in 1953 appointed the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry to inquire into the state of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and to make recommendations for giving Buddhism its rightful place in the country and for the improvement of educational, social and economic conditions of the Buddhists.

Earlier, on 30th July, 1951 to be exact, a delegation from the Congress led by its President, Dr. G. P. Malalasekera, had met the Prime Minister, Rt. Hon. D. S. Senanayake and requested him to appoint a Commission to inquire into the Buddhist question.

The delegation told the Prime Minister that despite the fact that the country was now independent and had a Parliamentary Democratic Government nothing had been done to give Buddhism

the religion of the greater majority of the people its rightful place in the country. The delegation had pointed out that Buddhism had suffered great damage and the Buddhists had been subjected to various disabilities, coercions and persecutions on account of their religion during the four and a half centuries of foreign domination of the island.

Sympathetic

The Prime Minister had given a very sympathetic hearing to the delegation and had promised to appoint a commission on the lines suggested by the delegation. He had asked the delegation to submit to him a list of names of persons from among whom he could choose for appointment as members of the proposed commission.

At the next meeting of the delegation with the Prime Minister, he regretted very much that he was not in a position to appoint a commission as proposed by the Buddhist Congress delegation. He had been advised by the legal authorities that the appointment of a commission to go into the affairs of any religion would constitute a violation of Section 29(2)(c) and (d) of the Ceylon (Constitution) Order-in-Council, 1946. It transpired later that certain amendments to the original draft of this section were made at the request of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. This amendment deterred the government from inquiring into the activities of any religious body. There is no indication as to whether the views of the Buddhist hierarchy or the leading Buddhist Association were consulted by the framers of the Constitution in this matter.

It was under these circumstances that the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress appointed the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry. The programme for the hearing of evidence before the Committee was organized by Mr. N. Q. Dias, who was Registrar General at the time. The Committee had sittings at practically every important town in the predominantly Buddhist areas in the island and wherever it went it was received most enthusiastically by the people.

Local Bhikkhu organizations, lay Buddhist organizations and individual Buddhists gave evidence before the Committee and the records of the evidence ran into thousands of pages. Equally voluminous was the memoranda submitted by Buddhist organizations and individuals to the Committee.

The burden of reading these documents and making notes fell on Mr. Mettananda. The Committee sat thereafter to draft the report.

The burden of this work, also fell on him. The most Venerable Madhe Pannasiha Mahanayaka Thero and the Venerable Henpitagedera Gnanasinha Maha Thera drafted that section of the Report relating to the education of monks and to the administration of the Maha Sangha. Professor Tennakoon Vimalananda drafted the section relating to History and Advocate C. D. S. Siriwardena the section relating to the administration of Buddhist temporalities and Mr. Mettananda himself drafted the section of Buddhist education. The

report of the committee comprising 256 pages was printed thereafter.

At a meeting held at Ananda College on the Vesak Full Moon Day of 1955 the report was presented to the Maha Sangha.

Question

The question then arose as to how the Buddhist Congress should get the recommendation of the committee implemented. They had necessarily to be implemented by a government which views with understanding the just aims and aspirations of the Buddhists. The perception of the Buddhists at the time was that the ruling United National Party was according to the most favoured treatment to the Roman Catholic Church because it depended for retaining its political power on the block Roman-Catholic vote.

There was also the talk that the party was guided by an inner cabinet of five Christian Knights. This perception of the Buddhists was strengthened when the government engaged the services of Dr. H. W. Howes who had the reputation of being a Catholic Actionist as the Director of Education. He was alleged to have discriminated against Buddhist schools in favour of Roman Catholic Schools in the matter of grading of schools. Later, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education admitted that there has been such discriminations.

The United National Party was so vacillating on the question of making Sinhala the language of the administration. The committee therefore felt that the United National Party was not likely to implement the Buddhist Committee's recommendations, even if it publicly promised to do so. On the other hand, Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, the leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party had already declared that he would make Sinhala the language of the administration if his party is returned to power at the General Election due to be held in 1956.

So the committee decided to ask Mr. Bandaranaike whether his party would agree to implement the recommendations of the Buddhist Committee of inquiry if it rallied the Buddhists in support of his Party. Mr. Bandaranaike most willingly assented.

Later Mr. Philip Gunawardena's Mahajana Eksath Peramuna coalesced with Mr. Bandaranaike's Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the coalition jointly agreed to implement the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry's recommendations.

The election campaign in the General Election of 1956 was a remarkable one. It was also an unprecedented one. It was more a campaign to educate the voters on their democratic rights and particular to inform the Buddhists as to how they came to be in the sorry state they were in now.

The Buddhist monks were the educators in this regard. As a matter of fact the Buddhist monks carried on their propaganda independently of the coalition's campaign.

The literature for the campaign was supplied by the Action Committee. In this campaign the committee was helped financially by some leading Buddhist philanthropists. Many Buddhist intellectuals, professionals, leading journalists, Buddhist

writers and Buddhist Public Servants of all grades and ranks and last but not least Buddhist peasants and workers rallied round the Action Committee led by Mr. Mettananda. Such was the trust and the faith the Buddhist public had in him.

The Action Committee also had sent the Venerable Henpitagedera Gnanasinha Thera with copies of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry's Report practically to every Buddhist temple in the island to the Maha Sangha and through the Sangha to the Buddhist public. The Venerable Thera organized societies of monks called the Tri-Nikayika Sangha Sabhas in every area he visited, the members of which Sabhas were to explain the contents of the report to laymen.

Campaign

It was at the height of the campaign that an incident occurred which upset Mr. Mettananda very much but which also showed his respect for democratic procedure as well as his straightforwardness. Mr. D. C. Wijewardena, who was a member of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry, the Treasurer of the Action Committee, the Basnayake Nilame of the Kelani Raja Maha Vihare and the Author of the book *The Revolt in the Temple* proposed that the Bhikkhu organization led by Mapitagama Buddharakkhita Thera also be asked to join with the Tri Nikayika Sangha Sabha organized by the Venerable Henpitagedera Gnanasinha Thera to form a united front of Bhikkhus to support Mr. Bandaranaike's Party.

Mr. Mettananda vehemently opposed the proposal. But the majority in the Committee thought it expedient to do so. Mr. Mettananda like a good democrat allowed the majority to carry out their wish. Thus the Eksath Bhikshu Peramuna came into being.

The SLFP-MEP coalition won a resounding victory at the General Election held in 1956. At the hustings the coalition espoused the cause of Buddhism, Sinhala Language and Buddhist education. This and the religious enthusiasm created by the Buddha Jayanthi — 2500 years of Buddhism — in no small measure contributed to the landslide victory of the coalition.

Neither Mr. Bandaranaike nor Mr. Gunawardena knew about the behind the scene activity of the Buddhist Action Committee had done during the election campaign. Duncan de Alwis, a school mate and a friend of mine told me some time later that Mr. Bandaranaike himself was surprised at the landslide victory of his party.

There is no doubt that Mr. Bandaranaike's eloquence and his sense of earnestness and his promise to make Sinhala the Official Language and to give Buddhism its rightful place in the country. But the spade work and the propaganda done by the Buddhist Action Committee in no small measure contributed to Mr. Bandaranaike's victory.

Hustings

Buddharakkhita who was very close to some leading members of the SLFP apparently made Mr. Bandaranaike believe that it was the campaign carried on at the hustings that brought him such a great victory.

It was more or less an unwritten tradition for a President after his party's victory to proceed to Kandy, to worship the Sacred Tooth Relic and thereafter to pay his respects to the Maha Nayake Theros of Malwatta and Asgiriya.

But Buddharakkhita and his friends persuaded Mr. Bandaranaike to go to Kalani Raja Maha Vihare itself. The move was not without personal motives. Mr. Mettananda never concealed his dislike towards opportunists. He lashed out at Buddharakkhita and other leaders of the Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna for persuading Mr. Bandaranaike to break this wholesome tradition, in order to get personal advantages to themselves.

There was great opposition from very powerful and influential quarters to the Prime Minister's move to make Sinhala the language of the administration. It was quite understandable why the Jaffna families opposed the move. They had a lion's share of the posts in the middle and higher grades in the Public Service.

They also dominated the learned professions such as Law, Medicine, Engineering and Accountancy by virtue of a century of advantage they had had in the matter of English education. They as well as a section of Sinhalese and Tamil Christians who had a vested interest in English naturally opposed the move. But what was not understandable why the two Marxist parties which claimed to represent the poor, the downtrodden and exploited opposed the move, and why they wanted parity of status for Tamil with Sinhalese.

Mr. Mettananda pointed out that what the Jaffna Tamils wanted was to continue with English as the language of the administration for ever and

ever and that the demand for parity of status for Tamil with Sinhala was only a redherring across the language trail.

He also pointed out that only a microscopic minority of the population, i.e., 6.3 per cent of the total population were literate in English and the balance 93.7 per cent who were educated only in Sinhala or only in Tamil were debarred from lucrative jobs in the Public Service and the Public Sector because of their lack of knowledge of the English language. There was a very high percentage of illiterates in any language who have to be hewers of wood and drawers of water for this English educated elite minority.

As regards the promised educational reforms, the Buddhists found that the Minister of Education in Mr. Bandaranaike's Government, Mr. W. Dahanayake was not at all keen on implementing them in fact he seemed to be opposed to any changes in the colonial system of education. Even a delegation of Buddhists under the leadership of the Venerable Narada Maha Thera did not produce any results.

It was left to Mr. Bandaranaike to implement some of the recommendations such as taking over the Assisted Schools in the teeth of opposition from the Roman Catholic Church. The church mobilized all its forces against the move.

Intervention

Ultimately, on the intervention of Cardinal Gracias of India, it was agreed that 'B' and 'C' grade schools should be handed over to government while the 'A' grade schools, that is collegiate schools were given the option to run as Private Schools on their own resources, without assistance from the government.

The sequel to this arrangement, however, was a coup organized by certain Catholic and Christian officers in the army, navy and the police. The coup, however, aborted. The newspapers revealed that the coup was organized by an organization called 'Catholic Action'.

It was at this juncture that a number of Buddhists got together and formed the Buddha Jatika Balavegaya to counter the activities of the Catholic Action Movement also called the Lay Apostolate. Mr. Mettananda was elected as the President and the leader of the organization.

Mr. Mettananda did not believe in baseless criticism; criticism for criticism's sake. During the controversy over the take-over of Government Assisted Schools, he had got down from England, all the Papal Encyclicals relating to the Roman Catholic Church's policy on education and social action published by the Catholic Truth Society in England. This time he got down works written for and against Catholic Action in England, America and Australia. The book published by the Buddha Jatika Balavegaya on Catholic Action in Sri Lanka was based mostly on the information given in these books.

Mrs. Bandaranaike's Government set up the Press Commission under Chairmanship of Mr. K. D. de Silva, a retired Judge of the Supreme Court. The B.J.B. was the first organization to give evidence before the commission. Mr. Mettananda as the President of the BJB said that as much as he deplored the anti-national, anti-Buddhist and tendentious policies of certain sections of the so called National Press he was opposed to the take-over by the government any press or curbing its freedom. He said such an action would constitute a remedy which may prove to be worse than the disease.

He suggested that the ownership of the Press must be made to be broad based. He was against any action that would curb the democratic freedom of the Press. He held this view to the last.

Mr. Mettananda was no ultra nationalist or a chauvinist. He was the first educationist to suggest that every child in Sri Lanka should be taught both Sinhala and Tamil. In a memorandum he submitted to the Official Language Commission he advocated making our population 100 per cent English speaking. He said: "I consider that under normal conditions the appropriate age stage to introduce English what is now called the Senior Preparatory, A four year course in English will suffice to read English books to gather modern knowledge."

Service

In a society in which most people take to social service and religious activity, seemingly selfless motives; but apparently to get places, ranks, positions and power persons like Mr. Mettananda are rare.

He worked selflessly and without motive. His motive, if he had any, was the Word of the Buddha "Bahujana Hitaya, Bahujana Sukhaya." For the good of the many, for the well-being and happiness of many.