

He unleashed forces of nationalism

With the passing away of Mr. L. H. Mettananda, the entire country mourns the death of a great patriot, a selfless Buddhist worker and an eminent educationist whose contribution to the recent revolutionary changes has no parallel in the history of modern Ceylon.

His death has created for the Buddhists of this country a void which will take many decades to fill. The Sinhalese people will lose a doughty fighter whose lone crusade for their rights, for the right of Sinhala to be recognised as the Official Language of this country and for it to be recognised as the medium of instruction in education stands out with telling effect against the complacent and conservative background of that age.

We of Ananda College have a very special reason to consider this as a personal loss, for he was the man whose untiring efforts resulted in the construction of the two imposing three-storeyed structures at the entrance to the College premises, the Science Laboratory which has won high praise from even distinguished foreign educationists, and the new wing of the College Hostel. He was also responsible for putting up the foundation for the Ananda Vihare which will be completed in a few months time.

He was, however, a builder in a bigger sense than this—for he moulded the educational destinies of Ananda College for nearly a decade and built up the moral foundation of the school on the tenets of the Buddha — on truth, honesty and righteousness ideals which were deplorably lacking in the public life of that time.

It was this sincerity of purpose and honesty that enabled Mettananda to stand alone against the many powerful forces of that time which threatened to nullify the aims for which he laboured. His victory in the end was a victory for the entire nation and the Buddhists and the Sinhalese owe him an everlasting debt of gratitude — a gratitude that can hardly be translated into words.

The background

It is difficult to assess the contribution he has made to the progress of the country in so short a time after his death. The vision of the historian, is blurred when assessing the achievement of a contemporary figure, even when that figure happens to assume such colossal proportions. Perhaps it is only a good half century later that a true assessment of his greatness will be made.

But it is appropriate to

make at least passing reference to his many achievements for which the people will always be grateful to him. In order to place these achievements in the correct perspective of history, one has to ask — what was the social and political climate that constituted the background to his efforts?

He was born in the colonial era, an era noted for its acts of discrimination against the Buddhists. He had his education in this background. When he became a teacher by vocation, he found that he was a second-rate citizen in his own country. He found to his horror that the Buddhist Sinhalese child was deprived of an opportunity of pursuing his studies in his own language.

After he had been educated it was difficult for him to find a place of honour because

st every one of their spokesmen — in the national press on platforms and at every public function and expressed his views with such irresistible logic that his opponents began to realise what they were up against.

The impact of his arguments on people of every walk of life resulted in the dawn of a new era of change which it was our privilege to witness. He unleashed the forces of the nationalism that was being gradually built up, and it was not surprising, that these forces were a challenge to those vested interests who clung tenaciously to the status quo.

An insight

The Buddhist Commission's Report which gave clear expression to Mettananda's line of thought was formally presented under the historic Sal Tree in the premises of Ananda College. This brought about a cataclysmic change in 1956 which has very often been described as a revolution. Yet it was that victory which gave us an insight into the real personality of the

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he was disqualified from his birthright by being a Buddhist. He found it difficult to find employment in a responsible capacity. He lacked the necessary accomplishment in the language of the colonial masters. Mr. Mettananda's whole life was one long crusade against this set up.

Then came independence. One expected the colonial mentality to disappear and a truly national culture to be born. But, to his utter frustration and consternation, he found that the old order refused to yield place to the new, and the old colonial set-up continued. It was time that someone took the lead in a campaign against it, and there was no more suitable person to do this than Mettananda.

His campaign in the forties was a violent reaction against this gross discrimination against the Buddhists — in every stratum of the social, political and administrative life of this country. He knew that he thereby aroused powerful forces — vested interests of every description who could direct their many pronged onslaught against him. Attacked, ridiculed, humiliated and even slandered, he yet stood up solidly for what he sincerely believed was right.

He was not at all daunted by the opposition arraigned against him. He argued again-

man and his true character.

"What is Mettananda after?" the people began to ask. Political power? A Cabinet portfolio perhaps? Or was it diplomatic office? Mettananda was supremely indifferent to personal glory. True, he could have got anything he wanted from a grateful Prime Minister. Yet he didn't. He treated personal ambition with the same contempt that he had for the colonial set up. For him the 1956 victory was only one step in the achievement of greater victories — not for himself but for the people on whose behalf he campaigned.

He exercised greater vigilance after victory than ever before it. Although Sinhala was at last elevated to the position of official language and Sinhala was accepted by all as the medium of instruction in education.

Thus Mettananda was one of the prime movers in the campaign that restored their national dignity to the Sinhalese people, and to the Buddhists their long lost rights. He was undoubtedly the one person who was responsible more than anyone else for the ushering in of an era of resurgent nationalism in Ceylon.

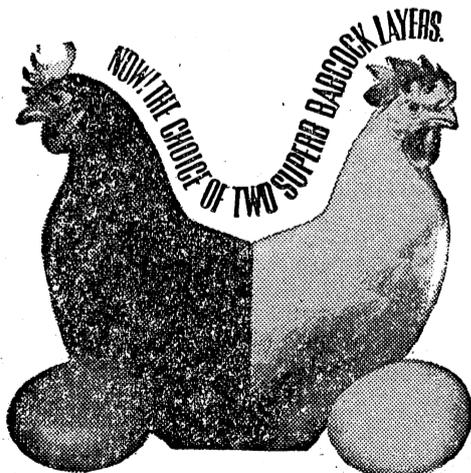
His appeal

To those who had the privilege of studying at Ananda during his period as Principal, there were events which will keep him ever fresh in their memory. He gloried in the name of Ananda, and in her achievements both in the academic sphere as well as in sports. I recall a little incident in my career at school which shows the real spirit of the man.

The cricket team of which I happened to be a member used to ask him for a feed whenever we won a match. He invariably gave us twenty rupees for the feed. But once when the glorious uncertainties of the game prevailed and we lost, it was difficult for us to face him. We were very careful to avoid him when he summoned us and gave us the twenty rupees all the same.

One of his statements has now become part of history. When he assumed duties as Principal of Ananda, he had to do so under very trying circumstances. The students were on strike. They were no better than an unruly mob and they were bent on violence. Mettananda appealed to them. "In the name of the Buddha. In the name of the Dhamma, and in the name of the Sangha, give me a hearing."

Yet his appeal fell on deaf ears that day. Very soon the whole school submitted to his dynamic personality and the school began to reach new heights of progress. His appeal to the College that day became an appeal to the whole nation. His words "In the name of the Buddha, in the name of the Dhamma, and in the name of the Sangha" will no doubt forever reverberate in the corridors of time.



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