

## Remembering L.H. Mettananda : Colonialism, nationalism and Buddhist revivalism

By Janaka Perera

### **L.H. Mettananda : 1945 - 1953, Principal Ananda College**

The watershed in Sri Lanka's post - independence period i.e. 1956, which led to the socio-cultural emancipation of the vast majority of the people of this country would not have been possible if not for the invaluable contribution of L.H. Mettananda. Though front line politicians grabbed the lions' share of the power and glory for the nation's huge turn around in 1956, posterity is likely to concede a much greater share of credit to Mettananda and the Buddhist movement that he led in the first two decades following independence in 1948, for the sweeping changes that took place in the religious, educational and cultural spheres.

### **Colonial oppression**

To understand the underlying reasons for the radical change of the order and the post '56 reforms, we must re-visit the period of our history under the western powers i.e. Portuguese, Dutch and British. The colonial era is nothing but an indefensible tale of oppression, exploitation, religious and racial discrimination, and using the modern parlance a vast catalogue of human rights violations. Mass murder, crimes against humanity, slavery and exploitation of natural resources occurred without any moral remorse or compunction on the part of the occupiers.

A culture of impunity enveloped all wrongdoing initiated by the colonial administrators. Underpinning this evil system of conquest and subjugation of the weak was the doctrine of differing rights i.e. one set of rules for the white man and another for the governed. These are well documented.

The irony of this sordid saga is that the colonial nations who should accept responsibility and account for the crimes and compensate the victims and their descendants to restore their dignity and return the country's wealth that was robbed at virtually gunpoint, are the very countries today that are pointing the accusatory finger at the descendants of the oppressed. The name of the game is Human Rights. Its pseudo - justice framework is meant to trap and punish the living in de - colonized states while allowing the principal perpetrators of human rights violations during the last five hundred years to get away scot free.

Not one European has been brought to justice for colonial crimes; not one red cent has been paid by the European nations to poor third world countries as compensation for colonial exploitation and crimes. The only exception to this inflexible position in international law is the example of the Jews being paid enormous sums for being victims of the 'Holocaust',

while the claims of all other victims of 'white colonial crimes' have been thrown into the dustbin.

While the Japanese are being hounded by the Western media for attempting to erase text in their history books that pin the blame on the Japanese for atrocities committed in China in the period immediately preceding and during World War Two, school textbooks on history in European countries are conspicuously silent on European crimes committed in their colonies. History has been white washed to provide a simple and guilt free view of the past for the younger generation of Europe.

### **The struggle for national liberation**

The colonial injustices in Sri Lanka had their outcome in the production of a range of national heroes spread over a couple of centuries who fought against the foreign invaders to liberate this country. They include Mayadunne, Vidiye Bandara, Sithawaka Rajasinghe, Wimala Dharma Suriya I, Nikapitiye Bandara, Senarat, Rajasinghe II, Veera Keppetipola, and Puran Appu. These are names that every Lankan should be able to re-call with ease and pride. Anagarika Dharmapala's name easily lends itself to be included in this group despite the fact that he adopted a distinctively non-violent albeit combative approach to free this country from foreign occupation and imitative living by his compatriots largely influenced by decadent cultural influences of the west.

Among the many contenders to shoulder the mantle of Anagarika Dharmapala's legacy and to continue his work to restore Buddhism to its due place in Lankan society particularly in the difficult transitional phase of the country's history is L.H. Mettananda.

He gave voice to the calls of the Buddhists to re-establish a Buddhist Social Order as existed in the pre-colonial period. A compassionate society governed on Buddhist principles which encouraged simplicity in living, frowned on acquisitive greed, appreciated high moral standards and ethical conduct, and accepted without qualification what the economist E.F. Schumacher was to describe based on his experience in later day Buddhist Burma as 'small is beautiful'.

### **Mettananda's role in the Buddhist Revival Movement**

Lokusathu Hewa Mettananda - better known as L.H. Mettananda - was born on March 19, 1894 at Kalawadumulla, Ambalangoda. He was the guiding spirit behind the Buddhist Commission Report that accelerated the United National Party's ignominious defeat in the 1956 Parliamentary Elections, reducing that party's number of seats in Parliament to eight.

The call to appoint such a Commission of Inquiry was based on the need to remedy the injustices done to the Buddhists under three colonial regimes which were continued in the post-independence period by local rulers subservient to colonial interests. The undertaking the British gave to protect

and maintain the Buddhist religion had been grossly betrayed before the ink was dry in the Kandyan Convention of 1815 signed 194 years ago this month.

Buddhism in consequence of the terms of the Convention enjoyed the same position as the Anglican Church in England. But even after 1948 not only was this fact ignored but attempts to marginalize Buddhists in the State sector, in the armed forces and elsewhere continued as before.

Mettananda noticed that the Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake's Government was neither prepared to give Government patronage to Buddhism as in the pre-colonial days nor was it keen to give to the Buddhists the same rights the Christians enjoyed in all spheres of society. Had the UNP rulers been far-sighted enough to enforce at least the latter policy this country would have been spared of the many upheavals that followed. It is very unfortunate that UNP election manifestos failed to focus on the restoration of the rights of the majority which were trampled en masse by the British Raj.

In contrast the Indian Govt. soon after independence passed special laws to change all discriminatory policies that the British colonialists had set in motion and implemented.

When a team led by Professor Gunapala Malalasekera proposed to D.S. Senanayake the need to establish a Buddhist Commission the Prime Minister at first agreed to accede to the request but subsequently backed out, saying that it would be a violation of the Soulbury Constitution. But it was really the pressure from the Catholic Church - a strong supporter of the then government - that made Senanayake change his mind.

Consequently the Buddhist leadership had no alternative but to appoint a Commission of Inquiry themselves to probe into the continuing system of education and other areas that denied Buddhists their rightful place. Unlike today, Sri Lanka in the 1950s had a strong lay Buddhist leadership that campaigned relentlessly against the powerful anti-national elements that relegated the island's traditional religious values and Sinhala language virtually to the dustbin.

A Buddhist Committee of Inquiry was established by the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC) on April 2, 1954 in accordance with the resolution adopted at the 33rd annual conference of the ACBC held at Kegalle on December 27, 1953.

The 'Buddhist Commission' as it came to be popularly known, held its sittings throughout the length and breadth of the country beginning at Ratnapura on June 26, 1954 and concluding at Anuradhapura on May 22, 1955. It gathered evidence from organizations and individuals representing all sections of Buddhist society.

In addition to Prof. Malalasekera and L.H. Mettananda, the Committee comprised the Venerable Abanwelle Siddhartha, Ven. Haliyale Sumanatissa,

Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya, Ven. Palonnaruwe Vimaladhamma, Ven. Madihe Pannaseeha, Ven. Henpitagedera Gnanaseeha, Prof. G.P. Malalasekera, P.de S. Kularatne, Dr.Tennekoon Wimalananda and D.C. Wijayawardena. But the chief responsibility of preparing the report lay with Mettananda. It was presented to the Maha Sangha at Ananda College, Colombo on February 4, 1956.

That year while Sir John Kotalawala's UNP government was dawdling over the Committee's proposals, the MEP (Mahajana Eksath Peramuna) comprising the SLFP and several other Opposition parties endorsed the recommendations, thus paving the way for S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's electoral victory that became a watershed in the country's history,

An abridged English version of the report was published under the title, The Betrayal of Buddhism. After recording in detail the injustices done to Buddhists laity and clergy since the Western colonial occupation right through the immediate post independence years, the report noted the following in its concluding chapter titled 'Tolerance':

"Almost every page of this report bears witness to the extent and duration of Buddhist tolerance (in the colonial era). And yet fully eight years after this country is alleged to have gained independence, when Buddhists ask for some of that justice which has been denied to them for centuries, they are characterized as a truculent majority and asked to show tolerance. By a flagrant disregard of historical fact and contemporary reality, the Buddhists are made to appear in the light of domineering tyrants..."

Amazingly this allegation is repeated even today - over five decades after the report was first published - by those who want to conceal some of the root causes of the crisis facing Sri Lanka.

He was also the leader of the Bauddha Jathika Balawegaya (Buddhist National Force) then popularly known as the BJB, and the Dharma Samaja Party. However, the failure to build up this party as a national political movement created a vacuum that unfortunately paved the way for the rise of JVP militancy.

Giving evidence before the Press Commission appointed by the Sirima Bandaranaike Government in 1963, Mettananda and other members of the BJB, vehemently condemned the anti-Sinhala and anti-Buddhist stance of so-called national newspapers. At the same time they expressed their strong opposition to the government takeover of any newspaper company. The BJB under Mettananda published a tract called 'Catholic Action in Sri Lanka' which proved vital reading soon after the abortive Army Officers Coup in January 1962.

Mettananda was the first educationist who proposed to the Official Languages Commission that every Sri Lankan child should be given the opportunity of becoming proficient in all three languages - Sinhala, Tamil and English. His desire was to see that we become a 100 percent English

speaking population - in addition to proficiency in our native tongue.

### **Commemorative Postage Stamp**

L.H. Mettananda passed away in Colombo at the age of 73, on November 1, 1967. Addressing a ceremony held at Ananda College, in October 2006 to mark the 50th Anniversary of the Buddhist Commission Report, Speaker of the House W.J.M. Lokubandara called upon the UNP to have a fresh look at the 50-year-old Buddhist Committee report. There are lessons to be learnt from it - he said -since many of the points raised in the report are valid now as then.

Many lesser personalities have been honoured for much lesser achievements. The least the State can do as a posthumous farewell tribute to Mettananda is to issue a commemorative postage stamp in his honour. The old boys of Ananda College which Mettananda steered as its Principal should ensure that this duty is discharged by the State.

- Asian Tribune -