

## THE ETHICS OF THE LANGUAGE PROBLEM - Remnants of the British *Divide and Conquer* Policy

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The people of Ceylon have given a definite and unequivocal mandate to the present Government to make Sinhalese the only official language of the country. In point of fact, no such mandate would have been necessary in any other country to make the language spoken by nearly 80 per cent of the citizens of the country, the official language of that country. However due to historical reasons, the minorities are so much entrenched in privilege here in Ceylon, that they are wont to deny the inherent rights of the majority to decide upon vital matters affecting the country, even where it is the restitution of justice to a people who have been denied justice for centuries.

The Tamil minority and some revolutionary leaders among the Sinhalese demand that parity of status be accorded to both Sinhalese and Tamil throughout the Island, and the resistance by Sinhalese to this fantastic demand has been represented as being undemocratic and as a denial of the fundamental rights of minorities.

It has even been suggested that the change over from English as the official language to Sinhalese is a sinister attempt to suppress the Tamils, and to make them alien in their own land.

In the course of this article I propose to show that the minority demand for parity of status throughout the Island, is nothing but the move on the part of a privileged class to maintain the **states quo** and to keep the under-privileged in that condition for ever. I shall show that the demand for parity of status is a sinister move on the part of the privileged class to create communal tension and to maintain unrelaxed their stranglehold on the under-privileged.

### SINHALESE TOLERANCE

Throughout the course of their long history, the Sinhalese people have never been tribal or racial in their outlook. This has been mainly due to the influence of Buddhism, which transcended barriers of caste, tribe, race and nationality.

They have always welcomed into their midst non-Sinhalese and non-Buddhists, whether the latter were from other parts of the Island or from other parts of the world. They were never suspicious of strangers and never exclusive in their behaviour towards other nationals. On the contrary they treated them with kindness and hospitality and the many testaments given by foreigners from the time of Robert Knox bear witness to this fact.

The Sinhalese people always permitted non-Sinhalese to settle down in the

Sinhalese areas freely and carry on their trades and avocations peacefully. While they themselves were greatly attached to their national customs, they allowed the non-Sinhalese to practise their own customs without let or hindrance. While they were greatly devoted to their national religion they allowed the non-Buddhists among them to practise their own form of worship freely and peacefully. In very many instances the Sinhalese Buddhists helped the non-Sinhalese and non-Buddhists in these matters. This was at a time when religious intolerance and dissensions were rife among the Christian as well as Muslim nations.

Thus, for instance, when the Moors from Arabia came to Ceylon to trade in arecanuts and other commodities, they found the people here so tolerant and so hospitable that some of them decided to settle down permanently in Ceylon. The Muslims we find in the remotest parts of the Kandyan Provinces today are the descendants of these Moorish settlers. These early settlers married Sinhalese women and became the subjects of the Sinhalese King.

However, neither they nor their descendants abandoned their ancestral faith, and the Sinhalese on their part never showed resentment towards them because they chose to remain as a distinct cultural group. As Dr. Paul E. Pieris observes in his book "Ceylon and the Portuguese" those Moors who settled down on lands belonging to Buddhist temples were even permitted to put up mosques on these lands. The Buddhist neighbours of these Muslims have respected their rights and the Muslims on their side have been most friendly and cordial towards the Sinhalese. One should contrast this with the treatment meted out to the Jews and the Muslims who settled down in European countries. They were remorselessly persecuted by the Christians until recent times.

## **THE PORTUGUESE**

Again when the Portuguese came to Ceylon, the Sinhalese were most cordial to them, until of course, they discovered that the Portuguese had other intentions than being friendly and neighbourly towards the Sinhalese. The Sinhalese Kings permitted Catholic priests to enter their territory and build churches. It was the arrogance and the treachery of the Portuguese and the intrigues of those Missionaries who had been granted hospitality that later produced a reaction among the Sinhalese.

The Dutch defeated the Portuguese later and occupied the maritime areas. Immediately afterwards they launched a violent persecution of the Catholics. These Catholics fled to the Kandyan areas and sought the protection of the Sinhalese King, which was readily given. They were allowed to settle down within the Sinhalese territory, build churches and practise their faith freely. The descendants of these are the Catholic communities, which we find in the heart of Buddhist areas today.

## **THEY CAME FROM JAFFNA**

Before the advent of the Britisher the bulk of the Tamils were confined to the Northern Province. Admittedly there was some Tamil influence at the

Court of Kandy, probably due to the fact that some of the Sinhalese Kings had married Tamil princesses from South India. However, it was after the British Conquest that the Tamils began to settle down in the South in large numbers, particularly in the Colombo District.

More than any other Imperialist Power in the world's history the British were most systematic in pursuing the policy of Divide and Rule. In the lands they conquered, if there was an ethnical minority, they immediately took it under their wings, showered favours and privileges on it, and built it up to be their ally in the exploitation and spoliation of the majority. If there was no such minority, it imported subject people from other British territories and planted them there to create a buffer between themselves and the people of the country.

The former policy was followed in Burma where they encouraged the minorities like Karens and Kachins. The latter policy was followed in Malaya, into which country they imported Chinese by the million. In the case of Ceylon not only did the British take the local Tamil minority under their wings and bring it up to lord it over the Sinhalese majority, but also Indian Tamils were imported from South India by lakhs and planted in the Kandyan areas with a view to breaking the indomitable fighting spirit of the Kandyan Sinhalese. They succeeded in both ways.

The Christian Missionaries played a most vital, and perhaps a most un-Christian part in furthering this Imperialist policy. With the aid of the Government they opened a network of schools in the Jaffna Peninsula and began to educate the Tamil youth with a view to fitting them into the posts in the Public Service. The South was comparatively neglected in the matter of educational facilities.

The Kandyan Provinces were entirely neglected in that respect - that being the price the Kandyans had to pay for their resistance to a foreign power. One can realize the utterly discriminatory policy pursued by the Imperialists and the Christian Missionaries when we note that until the coming of the Kannangara Scheme there were far more English Schools in the Jaffna Peninsula in proportion to population than in the entire mainland of Ceylon. Even today Jaffna has as many "A" Grade Schools as there are in the remaining parts of the Island.

Fostered thus by the Imperialist power and the Christian missionaries, the Tamils began to enter the Government Service in ever increasing numbers and in the course of time they were almost able to monopolize it. The Sinhalese merely got the crumbs. The few Sinhalese who received favours were those who embraced the Anglican Christian faith. Even the Roman Catholic Sinhalese were treated with distrust by the early British.

Within the course of about a hundred years all the large spending departments began to be dominated by Tamils. I believe even today the Public Works, Irrigation, Health, Agriculture and Railway Departments are largely manned by the Tamils, both in the executive and subordinate

grades.

Having the control of the key departments the Tamils were able to further the interests of their own people. The Government contracts were mainly given to the Tamils. The major share-holders in one of the most powerful newspaper combines are the heirs of a Tamil who made his money by supplying meals to patients in hospitals on a contract with the Government. At one time every P.W.D. Overseer from Kankasanturai to Tissamaharama was a Tamil; and these Overseers were given the opportunity of amassing such fortunes that their daughters then, like the daughters of bus magnates today, were greatly in demand in the matrimonial market. Their dowries often went into six figure sums.

In the private sector too the same process went on. The foreign owned banks began to be staffed by the Tamils and so also certain European-owned Mercantile firms. With the help of the Tamil staff in the banks, the Indians and the Tamils were able to get unlimited credit, which facility enabled them to enter into business successfully. On the other hand the Sinhalese were given extremely limited facilities by way of credit by these foreign banks.

The story was made current in the meantime that the Sinhalese people were lazy and not quite amenable to discipline and that was why they lagged behind. The Tamil was said to be very industrious, conscientious and amenable to discipline. But the Sinhalese people, who lacking opportunities in the South, migrated to the Kandyan area, and ventured on business there, without any credit facilities or without even any elementary knowledge of business methods, made good and showed that industriousness is not a prerogative of the Tamils. **The fact was that the entire educational, economic, social and administrative set-up was designed to create a privileged class of Tamils and to make the Sinhalese the hewers of wood and drawers of water.**

How far this had been successful can be judged by the statement made by Sir John Kotalawela recently to the effect that 66% of the revenue of the Island came from the non-Buddhists. The Sinhalese Buddhists, who are 66% of the population contribute only 34% of the Revenue. The contribution percentage is surely an index to the extent of poverty among them.

Mr. G.G.Ponnambalam once said in the course of a State Council Debate that the Public Service is the industry of the Tamils. In fact the Tamils have come to regard it as their preserve. Many Sinhalese Public Officers have told me that in whichever Office the Tamil officers are in a majority, they maintain what is called a "Nammadal Policy" or "Our people only" policy and make things difficult in diverse ways for the Sinhalese Officers to get on there. The Sinhalese Officers are treated in those Departments as strangers and interlopers. I am personally aware of certain Sinhalese Officers who gave up the Public Service in sheer disgust owing to the intrigues and machinations of Tamil Officers.

It is an open secret that Tamil Heads of Departments are partial towards Tamil Officers and that they lose no opportunity in promoting the latter's interests.

The Tamil's preparation for entry into Government Service starts almost at birth. The Sinhalese parent generally thinks it an obligation to register the birth of the child without undue delay. Not so the Tamil parent. In most cases they register the birth when the child is almost two or three years old giving a late date, well aware what two or three years difference in age can mean in the later life for the child as a student as well as a candidate for posts in the Public Service. A backward Tamil student need not worry over much. He can always get a clever friend or relation who had already passed the examination to impersonate him at the examination. This of course has now been stopped by the authorities who discovered the game. Even now some Tamil Examiners have no qualms of conscience in passing a question paper to some "Nammadal" or be lenient in marking the papers of Tamil candidates.

The Tamils have a way of bypassing the Employment Exchange. For instance there are very important people among the Tamils, some of them Knight Bachelors, who know in time that the T.R. permit of such and such an Indian employed in such and such a firm is due to expire on such and such a day. A telephone call to the Manager of the firm is all that is necessary to get the vacancy filled by a "Nammadal". Finding the door ever open for employment in various spheres in the South, the Tamils migrate here in large numbers and obtain employment. They also know how easy it is to acquire land and settle down here. Census figures relating to the increase of Ceylon Tamils in Colombo alone during recent years are as follows: 1931: 6.7; 1946: 9.8; 1953: 12.5. But the Sinhalese on the other hand find it extremely difficult or impossible either to find jobs or purchase land in the North.

In spite of all this, in spite of the slow and peaceful penetration of Tamils into Sinhalese areas, in spite of these pernicious methods used in these slow strangulations of the Sinhalese people, in spite of the Tamils' domination of the economic life of the community, the Sinhalese people showed no resentment, no animosity towards the Tamils. They remained most friendly towards the Tamils. They patronized Tamil shops, they consulted Tamil Doctors, they engaged the services of Tamil Lawyers and the Tamils were made to feel quite at home in the Sinhalese areas. But the Tamils misunderstood the Sinhalese tolerance. They remained aloof, exclusive and clannish. Their objective was to conquer the Sinhalese and not to consort with them.

### **Parity Demand**

The present demand for *Parity of Status* throughout the Island, it should be noted, was first made by the English-educated Tamils. It is these people who by misrepresenting the Sinhalese only move to the Tamil speaking people who have created the present communal tension. These English

educated Tamils are not at all worried about the Tamil language or the Tamil culture. What they want is to maintain the Status quo, where the English-educated Tamils dominate the Public Services and the Economic Life.

There is not the least doubt that they raised the parity demand in order to confuse the issue and to continue with English as the official language.

Using the slogan parity of status for Tamil throughout the Island, they demanded that the Sinhalese children should be made to study Tamil compulsorily and that the Sinhalese Officers in the Public Service as well as Sinhalese aspirants to the Public Service must be required to possess a working knowledge of Tamil. Of course the Tamils on their side would study Sinhalese and thus would equalize opportunities. Yes, equalize opportunities in the future, when the dice in the past had been heavily loaded in favour of the Tamils!

The bright idea was to perpetuate the Tamil domination in the Public Service and also to Tamilize the Sinhalese gradually. They of course knew that the Sinhalese would resist their demands tooth and nail. They also envisaged a communal clash and a deadlock as a result. The net result would be for the Government to continue with English as the language of the administration. That was precisely what the English-educated Tamils wanted. They were certainly not interested in the future of the Tamil language or the Tamil culture. They were only interested in maintaining uninterrupted the privileged and the superior position they have obtained in the Public Service and in Social life as a result of the Imperialist Policy.

Making Sinhalese the only official language will in no way affect the Tamil language. A language can only be developed by developing its literature and a literature can be developed without the language being made the official language. As regards Culture, its relation with the language of the administration is still more remote. Culture is sustained by the freedom of worship and the freedom of expression, which are always guaranteed by Democratic Government.

### **Class Struggle**

The present struggle therefore is in reality not a communal struggle, but a class struggle. The English educated privileged class who in the main comprise Tamils against the under-privileged class who in the main comprise Sinhalese. The leaders on the side of the demand for parity are Tamil Lawyers, Tamil Doctors, and Tamil Teachers in English Schools. On the other hand the leaders in the Sinhalese Only campaign are the Bhikkhus, the Sinhalese Teachers and the Ayurvedic Physicians. This itself shows the class alignment of the struggle. **In fact, that the privileged people among the Sinhalese themselves once espoused parity is extremely significant.**

### **Marxist Position**

The Marxists are wont to interpret every human struggle on the basis of

class struggle. They are said to believe in the materialistic interpretation of history. It is a pity however that a section of the Marxists do not view the Parity Demand in the correct perspective, that is, as a demand to maintain the position of a certain privileged class for ever and ever. It is a pity that they do not see an aspect of the class struggle in this move.

The N.L.S.S.P. in reality had to take the present position owing to a false move made by its leader, Dr. N.M.Perera. When Sir John Kotalawela gave the Tamils the foolish and rash assurance that the constitution would be amended giving parity of status for Tamil throughout the Island, Dr. Perera saw in it an excellent opportunity to divide the U.N.P. ranks. He was astute enough to know that the Sinhalese members of the U.N.P. would not approve of the “Parity” assurance of the Prime Minister.

Dr. Perera therefore rushed to Jaffna to challenge Sir John to make good his promise. To complicate matters still further for the U.N.P. he himself introduced a motion in Parliament recommending Parity of Status. He was making capital out of Sir John’s foolish assurance with a view to dividing the U.N.P. high command over the issue. Perhaps Dr. Perera had high hopes that when the U.N.P. house is divided among themselves, he would be able to creep into occupation. But he reckoned without the host, the people, in this instance.

He also failed to appreciate that **the language issue was in reality an economic issue, an issue between the English educated privileged class and the Sinhalese speaking under-privileged. That the majority of the former class happened to belong to a particular community was incidental.**

The N.L.S.S.P. is now trying to make a virtue of their opportunity, a principle out of a false move on the part of their leader. The party is thus betraying the Sinhalese peasants and working class people who are most affected. During the last 400 years the colonial powers discriminated against the Sinhalese Buddhists and denied them their elementary rights. In the last 150 years, especially the British, built up the power of the Tamils against the Sinhalese who comprise the majority in this country. After Independence, the Sinhalese expected that there would be an end to their exploitation by the privileged minorities. That was why at the last election they turned out a party, which had no historical sense and put into power a party representing the under-privileged common man.

The textbook Marxists among us do not realize the importance of that change. They are not worried about the aims and aspirations of the people. They are not worried about their religions and national sentiments.

However much a religious or national community has been wronged in the past, it is no concern of theirs. Their present policy, like that of the Imperialists, is to look for support where they can with a view to capturing power, so that they may usher in **“the glorious bloody revolution”**.