

Birth Anniversary of L.H. Mettananda: The ‘fanatic’ who was a visionary

By Janaka Perera

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If we are to paraphrase the words of veteran journalist D.B. Dhanapala the word ‘fanatic’ is the cheap epithet which sums up the invaluable contributions of anyone who spearheads a revolution without reward, engages in battle without booty and experiences no fulfillment despite enthusiasm.

March 19th 2014 marks the 120th birth anniversary of such a ‘fanatic’ Lokusathu Hewa Mettananda who as Dhanapala wrote “caught the rulers of his era dealing in short weight to Buddhists” (*Among Those Present*).

A new website <http://www.lhmettananda.com> giving details of his achievements will be launched to mark the occasion.

Mettananda was born on March 19, 1894 at Kaluwadumulla, Ambalangoda as the eldest son of L.H. Kovies De Silva a businessman and Weerasooriya Karalinahamy. He had four brothers and one sister. He had his primary education at Dharmasoka College- Ambalangoda, his secondary education at Richmond College-Galle where he had a distinguished academic record.

In 1912 he passed the Cambridge Senior Examination and in 1913 he successfully completed the London Matriculation examination. He joined Ananda College as an Assistant Teacher in 1919 and the Buddhist Theosophical Society (BTS) selected him to become the first Principal at Nalanda Vidyalaya in 1923, which was a new school.

In 1923 He married Celia, daughter of Mudliyar J. De S.Wickremesooriya. They had three sons and two daughters.

Mettananda was of the strong conviction that the cultural erosion that had taken place in this country during 440 years of foreign domination, needed to be changed and that the Sinhala Buddhist cultural heritage of this country must be revived and given its due place in our society.

Mettananda cared a hoot for the refinements of his critics, who could not bear the ‘cacophony’ of clamouring for the restoration of Buddhist rights in the immediate post-independence era.

In fact the situation has not changed much between then and now. In a sense we might say it has become even worse with the emergence of new threats in the form of foreign-funded aggressive Christian evangelism.

It is the current developments which prompted the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress to appoint - on the 50th anniversary of the publication of the report of the first Buddhist Committee of Inquiry - a second Commission to probe and report on the unethical conversions of Buddhists to other religions. This Commission issued its report in 2009. In fact these conversions by immoral and fraudulent means have affected not only Buddhists but Hindus too. This is also seen in India.

Mettananda was primarily responsible for appointing the first committee (also known as the Buddhist Commission) which was set up on April 2, 1954. It held its sittings and issued its report in 1956 having heard evidence from Buddhist organisations and individuals representing both the laity and the clergy, after travelling 6300 miles throughout the length and breadth of the country.

The report noted that Buddhists were constantly told to think as Sri Lankans (then Ceylonese) first and Buddhists afterwards but when it came to Christians the church did not seem to encourage its followers to think likewise.

It reflects what Indian political psychologist Ashis Nandy says about colonized minds. He observes that this mentality releases forces within colonial and post-colonial societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all. In relation to Sri Lanka Mettananda foresaw this trend nearly seven decades ago.

It was he who first demanded that the 5th Clause in the Kandyan Convention of 1815 on protection being given to Buddhism be included in the Constitution and demanded that the proclamation of 21st November 1818 regarding temple lands be implemented. He also demanded that Article 29(2) of the 1947 Constitution be abolished and requested the government of the time, to publish the Tripitaka in Sinhala.

Among the lessons Mettananda learnt in life was never to have much faith in politicians in restoring lost rights. When S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike was looking for supporters to spearhead his election campaign Mettananda moved in with gusto. He carried on a whirl wind campaign throughout the island, reviving hopes of Buddhists and portraying Bandaranaike as the new hero born to right wrongs Buddhists suffered over several centuries.

Bandaranaike however after he won the General Election of 1956 expected Mettananda to get into the spirit of practical politics and be satisfied with a diplomatic post instead of bothering about Buddhists anymore.

But Mettananda was made of sterner stuff. He spurned efforts placate him with cushy jobs and spoke out loud and bold again about the Buddhists' grievances not redressed. Bandaranaike turned round and called him a mad man. But Mettananda was only amused.

He was also the founder-leader of the Bauddha Jaathika Balawegaya (Buddhist National Force) and the Dharma Samaja Party.

Mettananda had five basic principles which guided him through life. They were: (1) never to seek personal gains; (2) never amass unnecessary wealth; (3) never make irresponsible statements; (4) always safeguard democracy and (5) lead a simple lifestyle.

During the period he was Acting Principal of Ananda College (1932-1935) and Principal (1935-1936 and 1945-1954), he improved the standard of education and the curriculum to be practical and constructive. Instead of punishing students for misdeeds, he taught them to be responsible and self-reliant. He was of the strong opinion that children must be conversant in both Sinhala and Tamil and therefore, made them compulsory subjects for grades 1 and 2 at Ananda College.

He was also of the opinion that English must be taught to students for them to be able to use it fluently in later life, when they go out into society and the world at large. Under him, education was based on Buddhist traditions and the mother tongue was used as the medium of instruction. He introduced handicrafts and gardening as subjects and also introduced vocational training subjects such as carpentry, book binding and iron works to enable students to appreciate manual work and vocational training.

Mettananda was also the founder-leader of the Bauddha Jathika Balawegaya (Buddhist National Force) and the Dharma Samaja Party. If the latter had evolved into fully fledged political movement Sri Lanka's current politics would have been far different. It proves his remarkable foresight.

He was a principled, fearless and forthright Buddhist leader who was selflessly committed and dedicated to the well-being of the nation - a *Kalyana Mithra* (good friend), honest and disciplined, diplomatic and tactful, just and fair to all.

L.H. Mettananda passed away in Colombo at the age of 73, on November 1, 1967.

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