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**Some aspects of Sinhala Buddhist
consciousness over the past 100 years**

KUMARI JAYAWARDENA

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a slightly revised collection of fifteen articles that appeared in the Lanka Guardian between March 1984 and February 1985 under the broad title '100 Years of Ethnic Conflict.' These articles were written in 1984 with the aim of understanding the nature of conflicts between ethnic groups in Sri Lanka and of the ideologies that sustain and nurture such conflicts.

My aim was to set these conflicts - between the majority Sinhala group and the others-in the context of the last 100 years of colonial and post-colonial rule and to understand the evolution of Sinhala-Buddhist consciousness that had originally arisen as a base for the struggle for national independence. This consciousness was at one stage directed against the colonial power but unfortunately it also contained elements of Sinhala chauvinism that adversely affected other ethnic groups. In this study I have been concerned with these aspects of the problem. I have therefore not touched on other elements of this consciousness either in its anti imperialist character or in welding the Sinhalese into a cohesive group

It is obvious that the last 100 years have included many long periods of ethnic harmony during which various classes composed of many ethnicities acted together in the pursuit of their class interests, disregarding or ignoring their ethnic affiliations. I have therefore also considered the growth of class consciousness to the point where it overcame ethnicity, and the subsequent growth of ethnic consciousness to the point where class distinctions have almost become irrelevant and when Sinhala and Tamil people of all classes are in mutually antagonistic ethnic blocs.

This study has been made in the hope that an understanding of the historic background and realities of ethnic conflict in the context of economic and ideological change, will help remove those barriers that stand in the way of a plural society free of ethnic conflict.

Colombo,
August, 1985

Kumari Jayawardena.

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1. ETHNICITY AND SINHALA CONSCIOUSNESS

In 1883, Buddhists and Catholics were fighting each other on the streets of Colombo; in July 1983, there occurred the worst ethnic conflagration in the recent history of Sri Lanka, directed, this time, against the Tamils. These events and the experiences of similar outbursts against other minorities, prompt us to enquire into the persistence of such incidents in the colonial and post-colonial periods, and the reasons for both the growth of ethnic consciousness among all classes and the decline of class consciousness among the working people of all ethnic groups.

In Sri Lanka, differences between groups of people are of a religious, linguistic and ethnic nature. The majority is Buddhist by religion and Sinhala by ethnicity, but the non-Sinhala minorities form 26% and the non-Buddhists 33% of the population in the last hundred years, violence has been directed against what have been called the 'un-Sinhala' (*asinhalā*) and 'un-Buddhist' (*abaudha*) elements in Sri Lankan society. This study is concerned with examining briefly the continuing manifestations of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism in relation to all other minority groups, the form of this chauvinism at different periods in the past, and the hegemonic rise of this ideology to-day among all social classes in Sri Lanka.

Recent Themes

The literature and propaganda directed against the Tamils from the 1970's onwards form an important source of information in analysing the recent phase of Sinhala Buddhist consciousness. I have taken some of the frequent themes of this literature and will show that similar ideas have existed in earlier periods, when Sinhala Buddhists were in conflict with other non-Tamil, minority groups. The themes can be broadly classified as follows:

1. The doctrine of the primacy and superiority of the Sinhala 'race' as the original, true inhabitants of the island,

linked to the myth that the Sinhalese were 'Aryan' migrants from Bengal.

A publication of the 1980's states:-

The Sinhalese race has a clearly documented unbroken history of over 2500 years. There is no history older than the history of the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. That Sri Lanka belongs to the Sinhala race is not based on mythology or fables handed down from mouth to mouth. Ancient rock inscriptions, inscriptions in gold, huge vihares and dagobas, huge statues of Lord Buddha sculptured out of rocks, huge tanks and irrigation systems all bear unshakeable witness to the heritage of the Sinhala race and Sinhala nation. Translated from *Kauda Kotiya?* — (Who is the Tiger?) undated, 1980?

2. An associated concept is based on the idea of a beleaguered island — the feeling that the Sinhalese are really a minority in the region, with no other country except Sri Lanka, unlike the other minority groups which have ethnic links with other countries.

The Sinhalese have no other motherland other than Sri Lanka. The Indian trade union leaders, the Borah traders, other Indian traders, the Sindhi traders and most Tamil workers use Sri Lanka as a mine from which they obtain money and invest it in large houses and lands which they buy in the names of their children and close relatives, in India. All of them live with one foot in India and the other in Sri Lanka. Their only loyalty to Sri Lanka is a gold-mine. They do not have any sympathy towards the Sinhalese culture, language, Buddhism or the traditional Sinhalese people. Translated from *'Sinhaleyage Adisi Hatura'*, (The Unseen Enemy of the Sinhalese), 1970.

3. The concept that the Sinhala race has been placed in a special relationship to Buddhism as its protector. Appeals to save Buddhism from, 'infidels' or non-Buddhists are resorted to and in recent years, calls for a '*dharma yudhaya*' (holy war) to

protect Buddhist monuments and to preserve the Buddhist religion have been made.

The link between the Sinhala race and Buddhism is so close and inseparable that it has led to the maxim, 'There is no Buddhism without the Sinhalese and no Sinhalese without Buddhism'. This is an undeniable fact. The literature of the Sinhalese is Buddhist literature. The history of the Sinhalese is the history of Buddhism. The language of the Sinhalese is enriched by the doctrine of the Buddha. The 'Era' of the Sinhalese is the 'Buddha Era'. The culture of the Sinhalese is Buddhist culture. The flag of the Sinhalese is the Sinhala Buddhist flag.

With the establishment of Buddhism, Sinhala culture and civilization took on a new orientation. The life of the Sinhalese began to be guided by Buddhism. Recently there has been an organised movement of anti-Buddhist barbarians to destroy our invaluable archaeological ruins and Buddhist shrines.

It is undoubtable that future generations, as well as our forefathers who sacrificed their lives for the freedom of their race and for the glory of their religion, shall curse us for our silence. At least now, in the name of our forefathers and in the name of the unborn generations, let us all direct our attention to this situation. Translated from *'Sinhalauni budu Sasuna Bera Ganew'* (Sinhalese, Save the Buddhist Religion), 1981.

Based on these concepts Sinhala Buddhist ideology assumes that Sri Lanka is the land of Sinhala Buddhists who are the true *bhumi putra* (sons of the soil), and that all other group are 'aliens', who are out to exploit the country and its people for their own gain, in the process sully the 'purity' and 'integrity' of the Sinhala Buddhist people. That this charge is now laid against Tamils is evident from this recent quotation:

Not only is this non-Sinhala minority group trying to destroy the rights of the Sinhalese people to their

motherland in the most unjust manner, but this group also perpetrates *numerous other injustices* on the unsuspecting, innocent Sinhala masses. Translated from *Kauda Kotiya* (op cit) emphasis added).

Other 'injustices'

Two of these other 'injustices' have figured largely in fashioning Sinhala-Buddhist consciousness as it exists today :

A. The perception that foreign or minority-owned business ventures have retarded the development of Sinhala business; calls are therefore made for privileges for the Sinhala merchants and for measures against 'alien traders' -

If this is a genuine national government it should appoint a Commission to look into the unfortunate situation of the Sinhala traders as a result of the influence of the Indians, and take remedial measures. Also, in order to save the Sinhalese from the dangers created by foreigners and Indians controlling trade and large plantations in this country, they should be driven out forthwith.

In the central market in Colombo, in the Pettah, the local Sinhalese traders today do not control even 5% of the trade. Power is almost entirely in the hands of Indians, Borahs and Sindhis.

The export-import trade is completely in the hands of foreigners. A person who travels from Colombo Fort to Wellawatte could see how many Sindhi shops there are on either side of the Galle Road. Every single one of these trading establishments was started after an independent government was set up in Sri Lanka in 1948. Translated from *Sinhalayage Adisi Hatura* (1970)

B. There is also the very prevalent view that non-Sinhalese have an unfair share of government jobs, university places, etc. Suggestions are therefore made that recruitment and university admission should be on a system of ethnic quotas. To cite a

popular document suggesting that Tamils have entered the university illicitly -

From the time the Peradeniya University was set up, the ordinary people of this country have lost the opportunity of studying medicine, engineering and the other sciences. Who then were the students of Peradeniya University? They were Tamils.

The cry that educational facilities are the natural rights of the Sinhalese was raised by such eminent persons as Messrs. L. H. Methanda, Dr. F. R. Jayasuriya, K.M.P. Rajaratna, who raised the issue in public. Because of this they were labelled racists. When monks such as Baddegama Wimalawansa, Devamottawe Amarawansa pointed out the injustice which was being perpetrated on the majority community, they were ridiculed and harassed. Today the majority community has realised how they have been deceived. Translated from *Visvavidyalayata Hora Para* (Illicit Entry into the University) 1970.

..... the important and serious question whether all the Tamil medium students who entered the Medical, Engineering, Science and other Faculties did so by the good fortune of receiving improper excess marks come compellingly into our minds. This is not only a burning question; it is also a question that painfully sears and violently explodes within the hearts of our Sinhala students, parents and teachers. From *Diabolical Conspiracy* (in English) — undated (1980?)

* * * *

To understand these recent expressions of Sinhala Buddhist sentiment and the way in which anti-minority feeling has been expressed over the years, some historical probing is necessary. Such an overview will show that although the ideology has remained more or less constant, the minority groups targeted for attack have been different over the years.

It will also be noted that ethnic and religious hostility has expanded at various periods among different classes in Sri

Lanka. Although such animosity has always had strong petty bourgeois links this consciousness has also manifested itself at times among the Sinhala bourgeoisie and the working-class. For this purpose, I first examine specific periods of conflict between Sinhala Buddhists and five minority groups namely, Christian, Muslim, Malayali, Indian Tamil and Sri Lankan Tamil — and will try and relate these events to prevailing class tensions and conflicts.

2. THE ANTI CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT

Ethnic and religious conflicts in Sri Lanka were among the factors that retarded the formation of a strong anti-imperialist consciousness, capable of uniting all ethnic groups in a joint liberation struggle. During the colonial period, such conflicts also, on many occasions, weakened the class consciousness of the working people, directing their energies in wrong directions — against minorities, rather than against the class enemy. While religious and cultural revivals have often been the basis of incipient nationalist movements in the Third World, Buddhist revivalism in Sri Lanka (in the late 19th and early 20th century,) used slogans of religion, culture and temperance to mobilise people in anti-Christian agitation; attention was focused on the privileges and alleged misdeeds of the Christian minority, instead of on the colonial regime itself. Since in addition, the majority of Christians were poor people, both Sinhala and Tamil, the movement became a distorted expression of 'national' sentiment directed away from the real problem.

It is a fact, however, that in colonial Sri Lanka, while foreign and local Christians (Catholic and Protestant) formed less than 10% of the population, the Christian elite dominated the political life of the country and held very privileged positions in society. To give a few examples, in the Legislative Council, from 1833 to 1912, the Low country Sinhalese representatives, who were appointed by the government, were (with one exception) Protestant Christians; a high percentage of Sinhala and Tamil entrepreneurs, professional people and government servants were also Christians — the products of missionary schools. The economic, political and social advantages held by Christians were especially resented by the newly — emergent Sinhala Buddhist bourgeoisie, who financed the movement of Buddhist revival. The Buddhist petty bourgeoisie of small traders, white-collar workers, writers, journalists and teachers, with the support of the Buddhist monks, also opposed the hegemony of Christians in colonial society. These groups spearheaded the revivalist

movement to promote Buddhist education, challenge missionary influence and to arouse national and patriotic feelings among Sinhala Buddhists. Bureacrats and missionaries were attacked for their religion and the campaign was directed against the 'Christian' power rather than against British colonialism. Even if this was a tactic to avoid charges of sedition, it had the effect of arousing Buddhists to a 'holy war' instead of a anti-colonial struggle.

The anti-Christian movement was also linked with the rise of religious fervour and the belief that Sri Lanka was the *dhamma-dvīpa*, island of the faith, with a historic destiny to protect Buddhism, this mission having been entrusted to the 'Aryan' Sinhala people by the Buddha himself. In this context, one can note that the creation of an ideology based on 'traditional' values, emphasising the ethnic, religious and cultural identity of the Sinhala Buddhists, resulted in an aggressive campaign against Christians. The battles, both non-violent and violent, were fought at several levels.

1. Through several public debates between Christians and Buddhists; the most famous of these was the *Panadura Vadaya* of 1873 where bhikku Migettuwatte Gunananda and the Wesleyan priest Rev. David de Silva debated the merits of their religions and tried to show the other was false. This particular confrontation aroused Buddhist popular opinion as Gunananda with his skilful mass oratory and knowledge of the Bible and free thought literature, gave the impression that the Buddhists had vanquished the Christians in debate; as a 19th century missionary wrote:

It was one of the most remarkable things I have ever witnessed. It proved in a striking manner the strong interest.... which exists among the masses of the people about their religion. It is one of the signs of the times- (Jayawardena 1972 : 45.)

2. Through popular agitation, including invective against Christians in the press; through pamphlets, some 'blasphemous' others scurrilous and novels such as those of Piyadasa

Sirisena, where the heroes were virtuous Buddhists and the villains Christians. In Buddhist journals in the late 19th century Christianity was subject to ridicule, missionaries were referred to as 'enemies' teaching a 'degrading superstition' and complaints were made against 'ignorant catechists who infest our streets'. (ibid : 61)

3. Through the formation of Buddhist organisations, especially after the arrival in Sri Lanka, in 1880, of Colonel Olcott and Helena Blavatsky, who launched the Buddhist Theosophical Society to promote Buddhism and Buddhist education. In this period, the work of British radicals and free-thinkers (Annie Besant, Charles Bradlaugh and G.W. Foote) were also circulated and the first issue of the *Ceylon Free-thinker*, which appeared in 1883, had an article on "The Evil Results of Missionary Education". (ibid : 52)

It is important to note that the anti-Christian movement had some radical content, in so far as the opposition to Christianity in a colonial context, could also be interpreted as opposition to 'foreign' ideological domination and foreign rule. Moreover many liberal and radical men and women from Europe and America supported the Buddhist movement and came to India and Sri Lanka as teachers Olcott and Blavatsky, through the Theosophical Society (formed in New York In 1875) had succeeded in mobilising many in the West who had not only rejected Christianity but were also challenging the imperialist policies of their countries. Theosophy offered an alternate vision of the 'Truth' not Eurocentric and linked to Christianity alone, but based on concepts of brotherhood and the unity of all mankind as expressed in all religions; it drew special sustenance from Eastern philosophies and believed that there were 'Masters of Wisdom' who were geographically situated in the East. Thus Theosophy, while having a liberal political content which also attracted many nationalist leaders of Asia, also had a strong tinge of romanticism about the 'Light from the East' and the superiority of Eastern religions. Since its philosophy was taken in an eclectic fashion from all religions, Theosophy could draw its emphasis from the predominant religion of each country.

Many local Buddhist activists were also involved in agitation at various levels including trade union agitation, temperance campaigns and even violent action against Christians. Finances for Buddhist activities came from collections made among local Buddhists — especially from Buddhist plantation owners, liquor merchants, traders and others who had made money from the colonial economy, and many Buddhist schools were endowed by 19th century Buddhist entrepreneurs like Thomas Amarasuriya and Jeromias Dias, who had made their initial accumulation through arrack renting.

Violent Clashes

This ideological climate and the emotions generated by the revivalist movement, led to the first violent communal riot in Sri Lanka's modern history—the riot between Buddhists and Catholics in Kotahena, (Colombo) in April 1883. The militant bhikku, Migettuwatte Gunananda, whose temple was close to St. Lucia's Cathedral, had organised Buddhist ceremonies which coincided with Easter Week. Catholics took this as a provocation and a serious riot occurred; street fighting caused one death and 30 were injured, including 12 policemen. The resulting Commission of Inquiry claimed that the causes of the riot were the conflicting religious festivities, the leadership of Gunananda—"a bitter opponent of the Christian religion"—and the failure of the Catholics to control "the more ignorant of their flock" (ibid : 50)

In the next phase of anti-Christian agitation during the early 20th century revivalist leaders such as Anagarika Dharmapala and Walisinha Harischandra took the lead. Dharmapala (1864—1933), whose father was furniture dealer in the Pettah, started life as a clerk and later became the apostle of what Obeyesekere has called 'Protestant Buddhism' name that Buddhists should mobilize, work hard, develop the country, reform their institutions, learn science and modernize the economy. He advocated a society based on industrialization and the development of trade while harking back to virtues of traditional society, with its class and caste structures as well as

gender relations that subordinated women. It is interesting to note that, Dharmapala was a great admirer of Japan, since its rulers were also trying to modernise their economy through the adoption of Western technologies, while preserving the traditional social order. Dharmapala was a dynamic orator and he attracted a large following among the emerging middle—classes and among the rural poor. Some of them followed Dharmapala in becoming 'Anagarikas' i.e. lay preachers who wore yellow robes and took a vow of celibacy and withdrew from most of the commitments of a lay life. Among the most important of them was Walisinha Harischandra, (1877—1913), from Negombo, who accompanied Dharmapala as he went around India and Sri Lanka on his revivalist mission.

These Buddhist revivalists were basically anti-Western and anti-Christian. Christianity was said to be the cause of a multitude of evils affecting society and a 'golden age' of Sinhala Buddhist culture was described, where there was neither crime, violence nor drunkenness. As Dharmapala wrote in 1902:

This bright, beautiful island was made into a paradise by the Aryan Sinhalese before its destruction was brought about by the barbaric vandals.... Christianity and polytheism are responsible for the vulgar practices of killing animals, stealing, prostitution, licentiousness lying and drunkenness.... This ancient, historic, refined people, under the diabolism of vicious paganism, introduced by the British administrators are now declining and slowly dying away. The bureaucratic administrators... have cut down primeval forests to plant tea; have introduced opium, ganga, whisky, arrack and other alcoholic poisons; have open saloons and drinking taverns in every village; have killed all industries and made the people indolent. (Guruge 1965 : 482)

Harischandra led a campaign for the protection of sacred Buddhist sites in Anuradhapura and in June 1903, during the Buddhist *poson* festivities, he organised a protest against restrictions on Buddhist processions. There was anti-Christian

rioting and Harischandra was arrested for incitement. The subsequent court case and his acquittal were the stimulus for an increase of religious fervour among Buddhists. Dharmapala petitioned the British King on this issue, stating:

The Sinhalese Buddhists are being persecuted by the subordinate officers of your Majesty's Government... they resent interference where their holy historic religion is concerned... liquor, opium and beef are given to the village people by the administrators.... the removal of liquor saloons, butcher shops and foreign churches from the Sacred City is what the Buddhists demand. (Jayawardena 1972: 114-5)

The struggle against Christianity was thus, not a movement of the Sri Lanka masses against the foreign rulers of the country, but rather a campaign by sections of the Sinhala Buddhists, who in their attempts to gain a greater share in the power and privileges of colonial society, aroused and articulated the hostility of the masses towards the privileged Christians.

Anti-Christian feelings have continued to break out into open agitation and conflict at various times in Sri Lanka. One important instance was in the late 1950's, when a Buddhist Commission was set up by a number of Buddhist organisations to look into alleged acts of discrimination against Buddhists and the Buddhist religion. Many of the old debates were revived and even scurrilous pamphlets of the turn of the century, were republished. While in recent years the people have been distracted by attacks on other minorities, it is nevertheless true that anti-Christian prejudices, though dormant still remain strong in the consciousness of Sinhala Buddhists.

3. THE ANTI—MUSLIM AGITATION OF SINHALA MERCHANTS

Competition in trade is a key element to understanding ethnic and communal rivalry in Sri Lanka: By the last quarter of the 19th century, the colonial economy was dominated and controlled by British as well as North and South Indian merchant capital. A bourgeoisie of Sinhala, Sri Lanka Tamil and Muslims had also arisen. While the economic base of the Muslim bourgeoisie was trade. Sri Lankan Tamil bourgeoisie derived wealth from plantation cultivation and from services, mainly financial, to the commercial sector; their Sinhala counterparts accumulated wealth in liquor renting, graphite mining and plantations. However the Sinhala and Sri Lanka Tamils were not strong enough to compete with the British, Borahs, Sindhis, Parsis, Chettiars and Muslims in the export-import trade and in the large retail trade. Thus, as an alternative, members of these two economically weak groups, competed for entry into the professions and government service. However, the small Sinhala traders were to become a vociferous pressure group which directed its hostility against 'alien' traders.

The weakness of Sinhala and Sri Lanka Tamil entrepreneurs can be seen from the following figures taken from Ferguson's Directory. In 1863 there were 33 leading merchants, exporters and importers of whom 27 were Europeans, 4 Indians from Bombay the only Sri Lankans being P. B. Fernando and E. Nanniytamby of Jaffna. By 1880, 54 leading merchants were listed of whom 50 were European, 2 Parsis from Bombay and 2 Sinhalese (Charles de Soysa and Jeronis Peiris). In the local commercial quarter, (the Pettah), the trade in 1863 was dominated by 75 Nattukottai Chettiar firms (of South India) who were in the rice and cloth trade and 35 Muslim traders, who dealt in various goods. No Sinhala and Sri Lanka Tamil firms are mentioned for this year. By 1880, the Pettah trade was dominated by 86 Chetty and 64 Muslim firms, with only a handful of Sinhalese traders such as H. Don Carolis (furniture) and N.S. Fernando (stationery).

By the 1890's new groups of Muslim traders from Gujarat—the Borahs Khojas and Memons—broke into the import-export trade, and became the new merchant princes who played a collaborative role as junior partners of the British.

Anti-Muslim Propaganda and the 1915 Riots

Hostility to this foreign domination of trade was expressed by the smaller Sinhala traders; the animosity while being against all 'merchants from Bombay and pedlars from South India', as Dharmapala called them, was particularly directed against Muslim traders of South India (Coast Moors) who were ubiquitous, being found in urban as well as rural areas, however remote. There was keen competition between Muslims and Sinhala shopkeepers and traders, the latter at times arousing consumer hostility against Muslim shopkeepers, when as in 1915, wartime shortage and inflation led to a general rise in the price of essentials.

In 1911, there were 280,000 Muslims, (forming 7% of a total population of 4.1 million), comprised of 3 groups: the Ceylon Moors (234,000), the descendants of Arab and Indian settlers, the *Malays*, (13,000) who came originally from Java and Sumatra during Dutch rule in Sri Lanka and the *Coast Moors* (33,000) who were migrants from the Coromandel and Malabar coasts of South India. Muslims were involved in all types of occupations—ranging from peasant farming and factory work to trade and the professions but they had traditionally made a name for themselves in the internal and external trade of the island. The stereotype of a Muslim, in the eyes of the Sinhalese, was that of 'trader', a category that ranged from itinerant hawker to shop-keeper and large merchant, although in fact the bulk of the Muslim population were farmers and workers.

During the early 20th century, the concept of 'alien traders' as opposed to 'sons of the soil' was popularised in the Sinhala press, the main proponent being Anagarika Dharmapala, whose father, H. Don Carolis, was one of the few Sinhala shop owners in the Pettah; numerous Sinhala writers, dramatists, journalists and monks of this period wrote extensively, glorifying the heroic

deeds of Sinhalese kings, recalling the victories against foreign invasions and also denouncing foreign traders and urging the Sinhalese to boycott their shops. In 1906 Dharmapala wrote:

Aliens are taking away the wealth of the country and the sons of the soil where are they to go? The immigrants who came here have other places to go to, the Sinhalese has no place to go to. Is it just that the sons of the soil should suffer while the alien enjoy? ...the ignorant helpless Sinhalese villager is made a victim by the alien sharper who robs his ancestral land. (Guruge 1965 : 528)

During this period, Dharmapala's attacks were specifically directed against Muslim traders; in 1915 he wrote;

The Muhammedans, an alien people.... by shylockian methods became prosperous like the Jews. The Sinhalese sons of the soil, whose ancestors for 2358 years had shed rivers of blood to keep the country free from alien invaders.... are in the eyes of the British only vagabonds.... The alien South Indian Muhammedan comes to Ceylon, sees the neglected villager, without any experience in trade.... and the result is that the Muhammedan thrives and the son of the soil goes to the wall. (ibid : 540)

Several other ideologies of the Sinhala petty bourgeoisie made similar provocative statements. The novelist Piyadasa Sirisena, who edited the *Sinhala Jathiya* urged the Sinhalese to "refrain from.... transactions with the Coast Moors, the Cochin and the foreigner": The *Lakmin*, (a Sinhala daily), writing of the Coast Moors, said 'A suitable plan should be adopted to send this damnable lot out of the country', and the *Dinamina* condemned 'our inveterate enemies, the Moors'. Some editors of papers which carried such inflammatory statements were prosecuted and in 1915, the *Sinhala Jathiya* and Dharmapala's *Sinhala Buddhaya* were banned. (Jayawardena 1972 : 170-1)

It was against this background that the first serious riots between Sinhalese and Muslims occurred in 1915 in many parts of the country, ostensibly sparked off by religious provocations, but in reality reflecting the economic and political tensions of the period. Many hundreds died in the rioting or in the 'summary justice' meted out by British troops against civilians under martial law. Several middle-class Buddhist temperance leaders were imprisoned, including family members of Sinhala traders in the Pettah. D. E. Pedris (son of D. D. Pedris, the wealthy Pettah merchant) was court marshalled and shot on a charge of inciting crowds in the Pettah to attack Muslim shops; Edmund Hewavitarana (son of H. Don Carolis) died in jail after his death sentence was commuted, and N. S. Fernando wijesekera (Pedris' brother-in-law) and son of the Pettah stationer, N.S. Fernando, also received a death sentence, which was commuted.

The reaction of Anagarika Dharmapala to these riots was revealing; writing a month after the events he said:

What the German is to the Britisher.... the Muhammedan is to the Sinhalese, He is an alien to the Sinhalese by religion, race and language.... To the Sinhalese without Buddhism death is preferable. The British officials may shoot, hang, quarter, imprison or do anything to the Sinhalese but there will always be bad blood between the Moors and the Sinhalese. The peaceful Sinhalese have at last shown that they can no longer bear the insults of the alien. The whole nation in one day has risen against the Moor people. The causes are economic and spiritual (Guruge 1965 : 541)

In subsequent years, open conflict between Sinhala Buddhists and Muslims died down, but the anti-minority feelings of the Sinhala traders persisted in the consciousness. This was recently seen not only in largely localised outbursts of violence against Muslims, such as occurred in Puttalam and Galle in 1981, but also in the context of much Sinhala chauvinist propaganda. However, it is noteworthy that autagonism

has continued less on religious lines and more on the basis of trade rivalry.



In the local press, (Dharmapala) carried on a vigorous campaign against the alien, whom he called a "national foe". He wrote verses in the "Sinhala Bauddhaya" on the manner in which the Sinhalese were exploited by aliens and published along with them a cartoon which showed a helpless Sinhala in the grip of alien traders, moneylenders and land grabbers'. (Guruge 1965:LXXIX)

We thus see that many of the themes of the anti-Tamil propaganda of the 1970's and 1980's had their origin in the consciousness of an earlier period, when they were used against Christians and Muslims. The most persistent have been the assertions of Sinhala 'racial' superiority and the special role of the Sinhalese to protect Buddhism, the hostility to 'alien traders', the concern for the 'sons of the soil' and the much-repeated lament, which was voiced in the *Ceylon Nation* at the turn of the century, that "the Sinhalese are isolated; they are

between the Devil and the deep sea; they have no other land to go to, they have no ethnological relationship with any other existing race or country."

It will be observed that the ideologies on which antagonism towards the Christians and the Muslims were nourished primarily served petty-bourgeois interests. But such ideologies, in specific circumstances, become the dominant ideology and attract other classes as well. In spite of the growth of solidarity and joint action by its different ethnic components, the emerging working-class in Sri Lanka also at times fell prey to this Sinhala Buddhist ideology.

4. ETHNIC SOLIDARITY AMONG THE WORKING - CLASS (1890—1930)

There were important periods in the labour history of Sri Lanka, when class consciousness took precedence over ethnic and religious emotions. The working-class of the island, which had developed in the wake of plantation capitalism in the 19th century, was composed of all ethnic groups in the population — Sinhalese, Sri Lanka Tamils, Indian Tamils, Malayalis, Moors, Malays, Burghers and Eurasians; workers also belonged to various religions (Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Hinduism), and in the case of the Sinhala, Tamils and Malayalis, caste differences also existed. However, a consciousness of belonging to a class, of being subject in common to an oppressive system of low wages, long working hours and harsh conditions of work, together with an awareness that as exploited workers, they had to organise and struggle for the improvement of their conditions had already developed among Sri Lankan urban workers by the late 19th century. Such conscious joint action of labour against capital in colonial Sri Lanka was a remarkable feature of the forty-years between the first strike in the 1890's and the economic depression of the early 1930's. This was a period when, in spite of the current of chauvinist propaganda that was popular from the 1880's onwards, the workers were able to rise above caste as well as religious and ethnic divisions in the struggle for economic demands and political challenge of the Sri Lanka working-class to British employers and officials, historically preceded the agitation of the middle-class nationalists, and also proved to be more far more militant.

Early Class Struggles

Fredric Engels, at a reception in Vienna on September 14th, 1893, honouring his fifty years in the workers' movement, declared that the best reward for his endeavours was the knowledge that the movement had spread to the four corners of the earth — "from the jails of Siberia and the gold mines of California to far-off places like Australia". He could have added Sri

Lanka, for as he was speaking, the first flash of consciousness among the Colombo workers had occurred; on September 12th 1893, sixty printers from the British firm of H. W. Cave, went on strike for five days over a delay in wage payments. During the strike, a public meeting of five hundred workers (mostly from the newspapers and other presses of Colombo) was held, at which the country's first trade union—the Ceylon Printers Union—was formed. Two hundred printers joined the Union and a resolution was passed urging other workers to form trade unions.

Although the movement did not gain momentum, it marked the earliest expression of class activity by the printers, who were an advanced section of the workers. They belonged to different ethnic groups—Sinhala, Tamils and Burghers—and were involved in printing in three languages. The leadership of the printers' union was also multi-ethnic: the President was a Goan (Dr. Lisboa-Pinto), the Secretary, a Burgher (A. E. Bultjens) and the committee members were of diverse communities, being Buddhist activists like Martinus Perera and C. Don Bastian. Thus the first spark of working-class action was based on ethnic solidarity and it is significant that the Union's motto was "unity is strength", and that this slogan was prominently displayed at the inaugural meeting of the Union.

There were several other strikes at the turn of the century, including laundry workers (1896), Jaffna beedi workers (1896), Times of Ceylon printers (1898), and port workers (1901). But the most militant of these class actions was the strike of August 1906, when 5000 Colombo carters (Sinhala, Tamils and Muslims) successfully struck work against vexatious new regulations imposed by the Colombo Municipality. The carters' show of defiance, their ability to effectively establish control over the Pettah (the 'native' commercial quarter of Colombo) and their aggressive challenge to the police and to government officials, became a part of folk history, remembered for many decades. At the time of the strike, the ethnic solidarity among the workers was commented upon in the *Ceylon Independent*, one letter praised "the power of unity among the masses" and another said, "the carters strike has supplied a splendid object-lesson to all communities on the value of unity.... the carters....

are men of various castes and creeds... but they left all religious and racial differences aside and combined most effectively". (Jayawardena 1972 : 125)

However, it was the railway strike of 1912, which proved for the first time, the potential power of the working-class, through joint action, to cripple economic activity in the country. This strike of railway workers (Sinhala, Tamil, Malayali and Burgher) for higher wages and other demands spread to the entire railway network of the country. Middle-class support was forthcoming from all communities; the Sinhala temperance leaders of the period helped in the formation of the Railway workers Association and Ponnambalam Arunachalam, who was one of the commissioners appointed to report on workers' grievances, wrote a dissenting report, strongly supporting their claims for higher wages and commenting perceptively that "Ceylon cannot expect to be untouched by the wave of discontent among the proletariat of the world". (ibid : 3)

Arunachalam and the labour movement

Ponnambalam Arunachalam, a Tamil, was a pioneer, not only of political and social reform, but also of labour organisations in Sri Lanka. He was one of the most gifted members of the colonial civil service and had wide contacts with Theophists, British radicals, socialists and the British Labour Party. On his retirement in 1913, he emerged as the leading political figure of Sri Lanka, being elected the first President of the Ceylon National Congress in 1919. Unlike the moderate Sri Lanka leadership of the period, Arunachalam took a radical line on many issues, being especially forthright on questions affecting the working people. He was far ahead of his colleagues in championing self-government and universal suffrage, and in 1917, writing of the World War and the Russian Revolution said,

The only hopeful thing about the present war is the refusal of the Russian people to fight and I hope the common people of all countries will do likewise. In no other way will this slaughter cease, unless you

get together all the 'statesmen' and capitalists and the rest of the ruling classes.... and dispose of *them* somehow. (ibid : 231)

It is therefore not surprising that he influenced the younger, more militant Sri Lanka nationalists, one of his keen followers being A.E. Goonesinha, the future trade union leader.

Arunachalam had always been active in championing labour; he had through the Social Service League, constantly highlighted the iniquities of the Master and Servant ordinance of 1865, under which plantation workers who left their estates could be charged in court for breach of contract and returned to their former employers. In 1916, he spoke out against conditions on the plantations, stating that "Being poor, ignorant and helpless (the worker was) unable to protect himself against the cupidity and tyranny of unscrupulous recruiters and bad employers" (ibid : 332). In 1919, the Ceylon Workers' Welfare League was Peri Sunderam, a Cambridge graduate of Indian Tamil origin, as Secretary. The Committee was a cross-section of professionals, Buddhist temperance leaders and journalists of many ethnic groups (Martinus Perera, K. Thiagarajan, Armand de Souza, C.H.Z. Fernando, Sam J.C. Kadirgamar, A.S. John and Dr. I. David).

In 1920, the League was transformed into the Ceylon Workers' Federation, which was mainly composed of moderate elements. Aruanachalam, however, continued to put forward a radical line and advocated the formation of trade unions.

It is only by organization that you can be strong.... A dozen men.... one by one are easily overcome, but if they join together they are strong and difficult to overcome. (ibid : 212-3)

He urged the working-class to "make haste and form associations everywhere" and to resort to strike action when other methods failed. The Federation had around 5000 skilled workers as members and also, for a time, attracted many younger acti-

vists like A. E. Goonesinha and George E. de Silva, who were later to lead the militant unionism of the 1920's.

It is important to record that the early nationalist political and reform movements united middle-class persons of all groups in common associations (the Social Reform Association founded by Ananda Coomaraswamy—the Social Service League, the Workers Welfare league, the Ceylon National Congress). But communal discord was already developing in the early 1920's. Arunachalam had disagreements with the Congress and left the political field in 1923, and by 1927, the Sinhala leadership in the Congress opposed universal franchise and stood out against franchise rights for Indian Workers. In contrast, the same period was the heyday of class and ethnic solidarity among the working - class. Trade Unions were organised among wide sections of the Colombo workers and joint action was taken on a basis of communal unity; in addition, the labour leaders of the period — most notably A. E. Goonesinha—championed universal suffrage and also supported the franchise rights of Indian workers in Sri Lanka.

A. E. Goonesinha and Class Struggle

The early struggles of the Colombo working class, without full-time leaders, were to pave the way for the organised class confrontations of the 1920's. In the years after the end of the First World War, there were food shortages and the consequent high prices led to agitation among railway, port, government factory and other workers in the public and private sectors. An important joint activity of the period was the attempt, in 1919, to unionise the railway workers. This inaugural meeting of 700 workers was presided over by Armand de Souza, a leading journalist and political activist of Goan origin. It is interesting to note that the meeting was trilingual — C. H. Z. addressing the workers in Sinhala, Peri Sunderam in Tamil and C. M. Jacob in Malayalam.

Agitation among many key sections of the working class increased in these years; in February 1920, there was a strike of railway workers all over the island, followed in March the same

year by a successful strike of 5000 Colombo port workers for wage increases. But it was in 1922, under the leadership of A. E. Goonesinha, a nationalist and social—democrat, that the Ceylon Labour Union was formed, giving the working-class its first full-time union leader with a militant programme. The first meeting of the Union was presided over by E. R. Tambimuttu, a Tamil member of the Legislative Council, who had earlier shown concern on labour issues. Soon after its formation the new union succeeded in mobilising the Colombo workers and leading the country's first general strike, in February 1923, which lasted for three weeks. This strike of 20,000 workers of all sectors of the economy and all ethnic groups, was based on demands for long-delayed wage increases, which were eventually granted in 1925.

The general strike which was the greatest demonstration of power, to that date, by the working-class, also produced its own leaders from among the Sinhala, Tamils, and Malayalis, including 'Hamban' William and 'Yakha' John, veterans of earlier railway strikes: Kandasamy and Kuttan of the wellawatte Mills, and Podisingho of the Government Factory. The class unity of the Colombo workers was commented upon by Goonesinha, who referred to "the wondrous manner in which the great masses of our artisan class have emerged from their age-long lethargy to vindicate their rights", adding that the "political salvation of the country would come through the sincere efforts of our masses". (ibid: 248)

A. E. Goonesinha, who came to national prominence in the 1923 strike, was able to give the Colombo workers a dynamic, militant leadership, championing trade union and other democratic rights and forming the most radical wing of the Ceylon National Congress. He was able to command the loyal support of workers of minority communities during the great struggles of the 1920's and this was reinforced by his admiration for Gandhi and the leader of the Indian national movement and his frequent visits to India,

The leadership of the Ceylon Labour Union in the twenties also reflected the multi-ethnic nature of the island's working-class. Associated in the Union's activities with Sinhala leaders

like Goonesinha, C. H. Z. Fernando, George E. de Silva and Victor Corea, were Sri Lanka Tamils including A. P. Thambiayah, who formed a branch of the union in Jaffna and organised the Kayts port workers, and James Rutnam, who in 1929 led a strike at the Nuwara Eliya Grand Motor Depot. The Union Vice-President was K. Natesa Aiyar, an Indian Tamil journalist, who was a member of the Legislative Council, and other Union leaders included Muslims such as M. L. M. Reyal, a Municipal Councillor, one of the unions' forceful leaders and public speakers and M. N. N. Haniffa and Cassim Ismail, who were lawyers. The Union leadership was also not confined to Buddhists, but included several Christians (C. H. Z. Fernando, Valentine Perera, Victor Corea and James Rutnam). When under A. E. Goonesinha's leadership, the Ceylon Labour Party was formed in 1928, the Executive Committee was composed of many Sinhalese and Tamils, the latter including A. Mahadeva, Dr. Muttiah and Mr Mrs. Satiyawagiswara Iyer.

In 1928, the All Ceylon Trade Union Congress was formed with officials from all ethnic groups. At the first sessions, A. E. Goonesinha, while attacking the Ceylon National Congress leadership as "designing politicians and pestiferous adventurers", deplored the condition of the working-class as "degraded and degrading" and called upon the newly-formed Trade Union Congress to "free the workers from their misery". What is particularly worthy of emphasis is that he also laid great stress on the solidarity of the working-class of all countries, extended fraternal greetings to many foreign labour organisations, including the Indian trade union movement, and asserted that the labour movement knew no differences of 'caste, colour or creed'. (ibid : 278)

Class Consciousness and Militancy

One of the biggest trade union successes of the Ceylon Labour Union was the port strike of 1927, when ethnic solidarity proved to be a key factor in the struggle. The port workers consisted of Sinhala, Tamils and Malayalis—the minorities forming a large proportion of the unskilled labour force. The 13,000 strikers, who held out for three weeks, demanded wages increases; they were supported by donations of money and

food by other sections of the working-class and on this occasion, workers brought from India as 'blacklegs' refused to replace the strikers. The commercial life of the country was affected adversely by the strike and the government was forced to resort to arbitration, as a result of which, the workers gained significant wage increases and more time-off for meals. The victory was marked by spectacular meetings, demonstrations and processions in the city, in which workers carrying red flags were joined by dancers, drummers, and red-shirted volunteers. The ethnic unity on this occasion was also strengthened by the support of K. Natesa Aiyar, who even urged that the strike be extended to domestic and hotel workers to "teach the white man a lesson". Natesa Aiyar also obtained support from Indian traders and shopkeepers, from who he collected rice for the strikers, and in the Legislative Council, he raised the issue and urged the government to grant the wage increase demanded.

Solidarity on an international level was also forthcoming during this event; the Australian crew of the 'Jervis Bay', which was in Colombo port during the strike, refused to work for higher pay and visited the Labour Union office to show their support and make contributions to the strike fund. At the reception to the crew on their return journey to Sri Lanka, A.E. Goonesinha stated that their support to the strike was a rare instance of practical sympathy and solidarity between Asian and white workers; the purpose of the reception he added was to instill into the minds of the workers of Sri Lanka "that black or white labourers all belonged to one great fraternity of labour". (Ceylon Daily News : 20 April 1927)

There were many others successful strikes in the mid-twenties, which was a period of economic boom, the prices of the main exports of the country reaching record figures around 1926. However the climax of this militant phase of the 1920's was the strike of 150 tramway workers of Boustead Brothers, which occurred in February 1929. The workers were of all ethnic groups and were supported in their struggle by the rest of the Colombo working class, who picked the trams; in addition, port workers refused to handle the produce of

Bousteads, who were also in the export and import trade. The strike had begun as a demand for wages, leave and over-time, among a small group of workers, but it escalated into the most violent class confrontation to that date. There were street battles, rioting and stoppages by workers in the railways, harbour, government factory and private firms who descended into the streets. According to the police "scenes of the wildest disorder" occurred when building and gas installations near the Maradana Police station were set on fire, resulting in Police firing which killed 5 and injured 250 (Jayawardena 1972 : 296)

Describing this strike, Philip Gunewardena, (a Left leader of the following decades) stated that the "The workers rose to an extra-ordinary pitch of revolutionary enthusiasm and sacrifice to defend their class interests and smash the symbol of capitalist authority, and displayed rare initiative and ability to cope with a critical situation"; he further claimed that the strike weapon was "the manifestation of the class struggle at a fairly acute stage," and showed how the tramway strikers "who (were) not interested in the law and order of capitalist society" were not only able to "put out of commission the authority of the decadent capitalist society", but also to challenge "the armed forces of the mightiest Empire the world has even seen". But this unparalleled display of class militancy in Sri Lanka was to prove the last important occasion for many years, of ethnic solidarity and working-class unity.

In the years following the historic tramway strike, the working-class leadership was to take Sinhalese workers on the path of communal antagonism and ethnic conflict; however, one has to give credit to the leaders of the period up to 1919, for their non-racist positions, for as Neil Kuruppu has written :

"It is to the eternal credit of Goonesinha that for a while, he was able to unite and organise under one banner, a large number of workers, including important sections in the harbour and railways....and so, for a time, Sinhala and Indian workers joined to fight for their rights and better working conditions....with

Natesa Aiyar's growing influence and leadership among the Indian workers, both in Colombo and plantations. it looked for a moment as if the working-class as a whole in the country, would rapidly advance to new heights of class consciousness, solidarity and action. But it was not to be and almost immediately the situation began to change for the worse". ('Communalism and the Labour Movement in *Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka*, social Scientists Association, 1984.)

The forty years of class solidarity of the Sinhala and minority workers needs to be highlighted and commemorated. In the 1980's when the labour movement is going through a phase of false consciousness, and is being aroused and misdirected by ethnic passions, the earlier period of class conscious activity serves as a lesson and an inspiration. In this connection, one has to give credit not only to the leaders of the early strikes, but also to those oppressed and exploited sections of Sri Lankan society who jointly participated, irrespective of ethnic, religious or caste barriers, in the important struggles of the early years of the labour movement, against both capital and the colonial state.

5. CLASS, ETHNICITY AND THE MALAYALI WORKERS

Upto the 1930's, feelings of ethnic hostility among the working-class were, to a large extent, subsumed in the class consciousness that had been built up during early decades of the labour movement.

However, even during these years. certain rumblings of communalism were heard among those workers who had been exposed to the petty bourgeois ideology of the Buddhist revival and the temperance movement. Sections of the working-class, for example, had been involved in Colombo in the anti-Muslim riots of 1915, their agitation being based mainly on economic issues such as price rises. Even previously, in 1910, railway workers had complained against the employment of Indians on the railways and at a Railway Commission of Inquiry held in 1913, had alleged that Indian Tamils and Malayalis were given preference over Sinhala and Burghers. But the prevailing ethos among the worker of the early 20th century was one of class solidarity and joint struggle.

Economic Crisis

The 1930's from a crucial period in the history of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka, when sections of the working-class, became involved serious antagonistic confrontation with a group of workers belonging to a minority. This was a decade of important political and economic changes; the new constitution of 1931 had granted a measure — of self-government, with a legislature (State Council) of 50 members elected by universal franchise. These reforms were enacted during the country's worst economic crisis, when the world depression had led to a drastic fall in the prices of Sri Lanka's main exports. This resulted in the loss of employment and the impoverishment of the people, who also fell victim to the malaria epidemic of 1934, when 100,000 are estimated to have died. These years also saw the decline of the militant labour movement of the 1920's led by A. E. Goonesinha, and the emergence, in 1935, of the first Left party in Sri Lanka.

The economic depression sharply increased ethnic tensions, especially since the working-class was particularly effected by unemployment. The closure of many tea and rubber plantations resulted in a decline in economic activity in Colombo and the retrenchment of labour by both government departments and private firms. At the same time, the presence in Colombo of non-indigenous, migrant workers aggravated ethnic antagonism. The trade union leaders of the 1920's resorted to a racist policy of arousing the Sinhala working-class to fight 'foreign' workers, in this case, the target being the Malayalis. However, during the same period, the entry of the Left into politics made a positive impact on the ethnic issue. Many young Marxist had by then returned from studies in Europe and the USA, imbued with ideas of inter-nationalism, national liberation and revolutionary social change. They were joined by the local socialist youth who had been influenced both by the policies of ethnic solidarity of the labour movement of the 1920's and by Gandhism, with its appeal for ethnic and religious harmony among people (Jayawardena 1971 : 200). The policies of the Left were based not only on the unity of all communities against imperialism and the unity of all workers against exploitation, but also on a firm commitment to anti-racism and opposition to any form of discrimination against minorities.

The Malayalis

The Malayalis were a group of migrants from the Malabar coast and the princely states of Travancore and Cochin (which now form Kerala). They were an important part of the Sri Lanka working-class in the 1920's and 1930's being known locally and somewhat derogatorily as *Kochchiya*, since many were from the Cochin area. In Colombo, they worked in mills and factories and were employed in other key sectors such as the port and railways. In addition, Malayalis were popular as domestic servants in the homes of the European and local bourgeoisie. The Malayalis also included members of the Ezhava caste who had migrated to Sri Lanka to work as toddy tappers; there was also a petty bourgeoisie of Malayali clerks, teachers, small traders, owners of tea shops and eating houses. In 1911, there had been around 1,000 Malayalis in Sri Lanka,

but the numbers had risen to 30,000 in the 1930's the years of world economic depression which had also affected Travancore-Cochin.

The local Malayalis were well organised in several associations and had a number of journals in the period 1920—1940. The largest organisation was the Ceylon Malayali Mahajana Sabha (CMMS) formed in 1930 with K.C.R. Vaidiya as the first President, succeeded in 1933 by IP. R. Kurupp with A. K. Nair as Secretary; by 1932, it had 44 branches and 6000 members. The CMMS became politically active during these years when the Malayalis were under attack. In addition the identity of the Malayalis was also asserted through cultural programmes. (Senaratne 1985 : 23), KCR Vaidiya was also active in the building of the Sri Narayanaguru Memorial Hall in Grandpas, the meeting place of Malayalis in Colombo. The famous Narayanaguru, who fought the caste system and inspired the Kerala Ezhava community to resist caste oppression, had visited Sri Lanka in the 1920's and helped to set up the Vignana Sabha, a voluntary organisation grouping the poorer Malayalis of the island (ibid). There had also been groups of Malayali Leftists who were in contact with the LSSP locally and with the socialists in Kerala.

Change of Trade Union Policies

Under the impact of seriously deteriorating economic conditions, the policies of the trade union movement underwent a drastic change. Trade union leaders either did not recognise, or preferred to soft-pedal the fact that the retrenchment of workers and the shrinkage of employment opportunities were a direct consequence of the economic crisis. Unable or unwilling to argue this line with their members, they sought to preserve the employment opportunities available for the group which formed their major base of support—the Sinhala workers. These workers themselves were made to see the 'foreign' workers, especially the Malayalis, as their main competitors, because they were allegedly prepared to work for lower wages. For the first time, trade union leaders spearheaded an organised campaign against an ethnic component of the working-class itself. The Ceylon Labour Union led by A. E. Goonesinha, who had sponsored ethnic unity in the 1920's launched a campaign against the

Malayalis which became very virulent in the mid 1930's. Class consciousness dramatically and swiftly declined and an ethnic explanation of economic difficulties was popularised, especially in publications, put out by Goonesinha and read by the Sinhala working-class.

The situation was also aggravated by the presence of a mass of cheap labour that could be used during strikes. For example, there were several strikes between 1929 and 1932—Lake House (1929), Times of Ceylon 1931, Queens Hotel, Kandy (1931) and Galle Face Hotel, Colombo (1933) when employers used the occasion to replace Sinhala workers with Indian labour, thereby increasing prevailing resentment. In 1931, it was reported that the hiring of Malayalis instead of Sinhalese as house servants had led to 'disorder and unruliness' and the use of 'guerilla tactics, became common-place whereby Malayalis were assaulted on the streets of Colombo'. *Ceylon Independent*, 30 July, 1931). At the forefront of the agitation was the *Viraya*, the Sinhala paper of A. E. Goonesinha's trade union movement which in the 1930's, was used to whip up propaganda against the non-Sinhalese. In 1930, in tones reminiscent of Anagarika Dharmapala, the *Viraya* (12 December 1930) blamed the decline of the Sinhala on the 'white man, Coast Moors, Bohras and Malayalis', and this campaign increased in intensity, concentrating, in subsequent years, mainly on the Malayalis.

The issue of Unemployment

The key area of agitation and ethnic tension was that of unemployment. In the State Council, the question was frequently taken up by Goonesinha, who had been elected to represent the working-class constituency of Colombo Central; he alleged, in 1931, that 1700 of the 3000 daily paid workers on the railways were Malayalis and added, 'Hundreds of Malayalis are coming here and depriving Ceylonese labourers of work by undercutting them', (Hansard, 7 Oct. 1931 : 506). Even the May Day processions of the period reflected this animosity, and in 1933, the police reported on 'the truculent attitude of Goonesinha's May Day procession against the Malayalis'. (Jayewardena 1972 : 320)

Grievances against the Malayalis continued during the thirties since employment persisted in the country during this period; in many of the vitriolic statements in the Sinhala press, the competition for employment was frequently highlighted. The *Viraya*, in its main features, editorials and letters to the editor, published a constant barrage of abuse against the Malayalis. In these campaigns, the support of other non-Sinhalese 'permanent residents' of the country was also canvassed. 'The Sinhalese who are its inheritors, as well as other permanent settlers in this country are facing great difficulties now because of the scarcity of jobs. But thousands of Malayalis.... are finding jobs'. (*Viraya*, 28, Feb. 1936.)

The employment issue was raised at many public meetings of protest during this period. In March 1936, a large meeting was held in Colombo North to discuss the Malayali issue. On this occasion, A. E. Goonesinha was reported to have spoken at length 'about the harassment and difficulties' that the local working-class was facing and the loss of employment because of the 'Malayalis taking their employment away from them', Goonesinha strongly criticised the government or its indifference to the question of retrenching and repatriating the Malayalis, also complaining that those who came forward to 'protect the rights of the Ceylonese' were accused by the police of stirring up racial strife (*Viraya*, 31 March 1936).

In these meetings and in the press, one of the frequent allegations made against the Malayalis was that they used unfair methods to gain employment.

On many occasions we have heard how one Malayali creeps into a factory.... then proceeds to threaten the livelihood of the other workers by using all types of tactics to fill that factory with his countrymen. Because the Malayalis are able to work for a very low wage and live in a state of deprivation they.... are a threat to the Ceylonese Workers. (*Viraya*, Editorial, 31 March 1936).

* The above and all subsequent quotations from *Viraya* are translations.

Boycott of Malayalis

The anti-Malayali campaign was carried on at several levels. In the State Council, A.E. Goonesinha urged the government to repatriate Malayalis and give local workers their jobs. Appeals were made to employers not to be tempted by the cheap supply of Malayali labour. House owners were requested to refuse to rent houses to Malayalis and to boycott their shops and tea shops. In an editorial 'Can we boycott the Malayalis?' the *Viraya* issued a call 'to support the campaign to boycott the Malayalis and to unite as Sinhalese' (1 April 1936): the following week, an enthusiastic letter to the editor entitled 'How should we boycott the Malayalis?' claimed that 'the call for a boycott is heard from all sides' and added 'what you should do is to demand the dismissal of the Malayalis from their jobs in your factory, estate, shop, bungalow. ... and ask that Sinhalese be employed in their place'. This call for boycott was claimed to be non-violent, but the campaign was very aggressive.

We should think of ways in which we can make our struggle triumph through non-violent means, through a holy war (dharma yuddaya). All those who love their country and love their fellow countrymen should.... launch a strong campaign in every village to call a halt to all dealings and trade with Malayalis, a halt to renting out houses to them, a halt to all connections with them and a peaceful boycott of these people in a way that will protect not only our dignity but the dignity of future generations. (*Viraya*, 6 April 1936.)

It is interesting to note that in the agitation against Malayalis, local Tamils were classed on the same side with the Sinhala 'sons of the soil'. For example, complaints were made of discrimination in Malayali tea shops against both Sinhala and Tamil customers.

There are special plates and cups set aside for the use of Malayalis. For.... the Sinhala, Tamils and those who belong to another race, there are separate plates, cups

and saucers. If a Sinhalese and a Tamil *aiya* were to go into one of these places.... the waiter would call out 'tea rendu aiya'. Then the person.... making the tea would know that it is not a Malayali but one of another race who is wanting tea. (*Viraya* 16 April 1936.)

The Chosen Aryan People

This upsurge of racism in Sri Lanka in the 1930's coincided with the rise of Fascism in Germany and Italy, and several local newspapers gave sympathetic accounts of the internal and foreign policies of Hitler and Mussolini and many nationalist and labour leaders, especially those who had been influenced by the myth of the Aryan origin of the Sinhalese, found the language and rhetoric emanating from Germany and Italy, useful in their own progaganda.

In 1936, A. E. Goonesinha organised Sinhala New year celebrations in Colombo, where he proclaimed that 'As Sinhalese we must unite under one flag' the chief guest on this occasion was D. S. Senanayake, the Minister of Agriculture whose speech is of interest for its rousing appeal addressed to the Sinhala people.

We are one blood and one nation. We are a chosen people. The Buddha said that his religion would last for 5500 years. That means that we, as the custodians of that religion, shall last as long' (Ceylon Daily News, 17 April 1939, emphasis added).

Similar sentiments were expressed in the trade union papers of this period. One such letter in *Viraya* lamented the fate of the Sinhala people who were like a flock of sheep without a shepherd. To save the Sinhala race there was a need for a 'group of virtuous, steadfast people, with a leader.... a hero of great virtue and courage'. In fact, the need of the day was said to be for a leader like Hitler, who was implementing policies for saving the Aryan race from degeneration. (*Viraya*, 17 April, 1936).

Racism and Women

Another myth associated with this type of racism was that of 'racial purity' which had to be preserved by the country's women. This was one of the emotive themes of the 1930's since many Malayali workers who had come alone to Sri Lanka, had married Sinhala women. The *Viraya* of the 1930's often lamented that the Sinhala people were losing both their jobs and their women to the Malayalis and even alleged that this was linked to the black magic and charms for which the Malayalis were reputed. In 1936, A. E. Goonesinha, at a public meeting, spoke of the disgrace to Sri Lanka 'as a result of Sinhala women falling prey to the wiles of the Malayali' (*Viraya*, 31 March 1936). The *Viraya* also favourably commented on reports of incidents where Malayalis were stabbed and beaten for having liaisons with Sinhala women (*Viraya*, 7 Jan 1931): the women themselves were urged not to shame the race by consorting with Malayalis, and plays were performed showing the gloomy fate of those Sinhala women who were enticed and later abandoned by Malayalis.

This theme was developed, in its full racist sense, in a letter to the *Viraya* (signed B Sirisena) on "Mixed Marriages and National Development"; speaking with great approval of Hitler's anti-Jewish policies, he wrote:

It was Hitler, the leader of Germany who said that leadership cannot be expected from those who are devoid of Aryan blood. In his country he has therefore prohibited marriages between Aryans and non-Aryans. He has even declared illegal the employment of young Aryan German girls as domestics in the houses of non-Aryans. In California and Persia too, marriages with foreigners are prohibited. The intention of all these measures is the creation of a pure Aryan race. They believe that the children of Aryan and non-Aryan marriages will be degenerate, devoid of any virtue. (*Viraya* 17 April 1936)

This writer further suggested that, taking inspiration from Fascist Germany, the Sinhala people should bestir themselves

and prohibit mixed marriages between 'Aryan' Sinhala women and Malayalis.

Everyone says that unions between Sinhala women and Malayalis — whether legal or illicit—should be prohibited. If this practice, which is certain to lead the nation to slavery and servitude, is prohibited, it will be a timely step for the cause of the Sinhala race. It is the duty of all Sinhalese to advocate this measure. (*Viraya*, 17 April 1936).

Support for the Malayalis

Given the climate of opinion, it is not surprising that A. E. Goonesinha also used the campaign for the boycott of Malayali workers to attack those anti-racist, Liberal and Left politicians of Sri Lanka who spoke out on behalf of the Malayalis. The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the country's first Left party, had been formed in 1935 and had challenged the hegemony of Goonesinha over the trade union movement; even earlier (in 1933) this Left group had captured the trade union of the Wellawatte Spinning and Weaving Mills (from Goonesinha), after leading a long strike at the Mills. A large proportion of these textile workers were Malayalis, who, during the strike, were involved in violent clashes with Goonesinha's supporters. During these years, the *Viraya* retaliated by constantly accusing the LSSP of betraying the Sinhala people. An editorial entitled 'Have the Malayalis received the patronage of the Samasamajists?' said

Alas, what are these Communists doing to our great and proud nation?... Because of the Samasamajists.... and because of the Malayali traders.... the Sinhala poor man has to starve to death. His meal has gone to the foreigner. How can the poor Sinhala man compete with the Malayalis who receive support from the Communists? (*Viraya*, 31 March 1936)

Allegations of treachery were levelled against the leadership of the LSSP, and the columns of the *Viraya* of the years between 1935 and 1939, were filled with personal abuse of the Marxists; particularly vicious tirades were directed at the

party president, Dr. Colvin R De Silva and the other prominent LSSP leaders — Philip Gunawardena, Dr. N. M. Perera, Leslie Goonewardena and Dr. S. A. Wickremasinghe.

The actions of the traitors of a race.... will lead to the down-fall of the race.... At a time when the campaign to boycott.... the Malayalis is proceeding.... several Samasamajist Sinhala lunatics are trying to go against this trend.... N. M. Perera Colvin R. de Silva, Dr. S. A. Wickremasinghe... have been making baseless allegations against this campaign.... Dr. Wickremasinghe boasted of the way in which they had helped a group of Malayalis who were thrown out of their jobs at the Alutkade Oil Mills.... Isn't the attempt made by these individuals to keep the Malayalis here, an insult to the entire Sinhala race? (*Viraya*, 16 April 1936)

Support for the Malayalis also came from others such as Dr. A. P. de Zoysa, the Independent Member of the State Council for Colombo South, who spoke at several public meetings on behalf of the Malayalis and on one occasion, said, 'show *maitri* (compassion) to the Malayalis.... they are our Kith and Kin. The *Viraya* responded sharply, 'At a time such as this, when we Ceylonese are united and, in one voice, are decrying the Malayalis plague and are trying to rid our country of this disaster.... the words uttered by Dr. de Zoysa on a Malayali platform, are truly an insult to all Sinhalese (*Viraya*, 5 July 1936). Such attacks on de Zoysa continued in subsequent years, and when he addressed meetings he was greeted with cries of 'hara hara' and 'kochchi Zoysa.'

A. K. Gopalan's Visit

The Malayali presence however was also to influence Left politics in Sri Lanka. In Kerala, during the 1930's there was a wave of militant anti-imperialist and anti-feudal agitation, when workers, peasants, students and others were caught up in struggles led mainly by the socialist faction of the Indian National Congress, which was very active in the state from 1934 onwards. The joint Secretaries of the Congress Socialist Party in Kerala were E. M. S. Namboodiripad, (who headed the first

Communist government in Kerala in 1957—59) and A.K. Gopalan, who was to become one of the most popular Communist leaders of Kerala and the leading organiser of the peasantry.

In 1939, A.K. Gopalan visited Sri Lanka to establish fraternal links with the Left movement, to make political contacts among local Malayalis, and to raise subscriptions for the Kerala Socialist paper, *Prabhatham*, (which had been started in by Namboodiripad). Gopalan addressed many public meetings in Colombo, including one at the Town Hall, where he spoke on socialism and the peasant struggles in Kerala; he also spoke at a large meeting of workers at the Wellawatte Spinning and Weaving Mills organised by the LSSP and addressed the LSSP May Day rally in 1939, where he urged the radical Malayalis in Sri Lanka to work with the LSSP.

Gopalan was also to personally experience the prevalent anti-Malayali hostility, including an unsuccessful attempt by ruffians to break up his meeting at Wellawatte and anti-Malayali plays, songs and incidents which he witnessed: in later years, he noted in his autobiography 'I arrived in Ceylon at a dangerous time.... Sinhala Malayali enmity had reached its Zenith'. (Gopalan, 1976 : 120)

Malayali workers and the communists

The LSSP in the thirties, had taken a non-racist stand and had bitterly opposed the virulent campaign that had been launched against the Malayali minority. It was a period when the leaders of the LSSP kept in close contact with the Congress Socialist Party, being inspired by the militant peoples' struggles all over India during those years. They visited India each year for the Congress sessions, and hosted Indian Congress Socialists like Nehru, Kamaladevi Chattopadyaya and A. K. Gopalan when they visited Sri Lanka,

In 1940, there was a split in the LSSP when Trotskyists expelled the stalinists, who regrouped as the United Socialists Party in 1940, and later formed the Ceylon Communist Party in 1943. One of the key sections of support for the United Socialist Party came from a Malayali Socialist group and from the Toddy Tappers Union. This union was composed of militant Malayali workers, who in 1939 and 1940, had been involved in

a series of successful disputes and strikes over wages. The Union was led by Communists including the President, K. Ramathanan (an Indian Tamil) the Secretary, M. G. Mendis and P. Shanker, the most active of the Malayali Communists of the period; this Union became one of the strongest in the non-plantation sector, and its strike successes influenced Malayali and other workers in the urban-sector. When the Communist led Ceylon Trade Union Federation (CTUF) of 16 unions was formed in 1940, the leading union in the Federation was the Toddy Tappers Union, and among the CTUF leadership there was several Malayalis, the best-known being K. Madhavan. The Communists also published a Malayalam paper *Navashakti* which was run by full-time Malayali political workers-Vasu and Thangappan. In addition, it should be mentioned that the successes of certain Left candidates in the Colombo Municipal Council elections of the period was based to a large extent on the Malayali vote.

The strong class conscious actions and the pro-Communist positions taken by the Malayali workers of Sri Lanka can be attributed to several factors; these include their earlier tradition of militant strike action in the 1920's, the influence of the growing Kerala Communist movement of the period and the visit of its leaders to Sri Lanka, the racism of the Ceylon Labour Union, the support for the Malayali struggle given by the local Left movement and the success of the toddy tappers' strikes. An official of the labour department describing the success of the Communists in mobilising Malayalis said, 'Malayali labour buffeted hither and thither by racial animosity and stern employers, found a platform in this new party, to ventilate their grievances'.

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In the 1940's the majority of the Malayalis returned to India, while many of those who stayed on married Sinhalese, the next generation becoming assimilated into the Sinhala community. However, a study of the Malayali presence in the thirties - when the Malayalis were not merely the main target for racist attacks, but also formed an important component of the Left movement - gives us many insights for an understanding of class and ethnic relations

The petty bourgeoisie

The anti-Malayali campaign of the 1930's brought chauvinism right to the forefront of the working-class movement, when large sections of the Sinhala working-class, were made to respond to the idea that the main enemy was the Malayali. The poverty, unemployment and lack of opportunities in a colonial economy, rent by the economic crisis of a severe world depression, proved to be the breeding ground for rampant chauvinism among workers who a few years earlier, had participated in joint struggles against the employers.

In this context, the opportunism of the petty bourgeois leadership of the working-class was also exposed. As a class, the petty bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka had shown (and still shows) a remarkable agility in moving from radical political stances to racist positions within a short space of time. A. E. Goonesinha who had been a close associate of Anagarika Dharmapala, and was himself a product of the Buddhist education and temperance movement, abandoned his militant policies of the 1930's, ending up finally on the side of the ruling class.

The Fascist Connection

Earlier sections of this book have identified certain component elements of Sinhala Buddhist consciousness and attempted to show how they were used, by the Sinhala petty bourgeoisie of the 19th and early 20th centuries against Christians and Muslims. By the 1930's we find that this ideology had spread to the Sinhala working-class as well. A forceful propaganda campaign during these years revived the belief in the 'chosen' nature of the 'Aryan' Sinhalese as guardians of Buddhism, their racial 'purity' and their inherent right to the country as 'sons of the soil'; non-Sinhala, non-Buddhist aliens were condemned and there were allusions to the need for a 'holy war'. The working-class newspapers of this period very aggressively asserted this ideology of Sinhala Buddhist supremacy; the old battle cries of Dharmapala, that the Sinhala people were in danger of being swamped by aliens who were taking away their jobs and their trade, were repeated in almost every issue of the Ceylon Labour Unions' paper. At public meetings and even at May Day rallies of the Union, class issue such as wages and conditions of

work were submerged by anti-minority propaganda. During these years, workers were continuously urged not to forget that they were both Sinhala and Buddhist for this purpose, the trade union papers continuously highlighted the Sinhala New Year and Buddhist *Vesak* festivities in order to augment to Sinhala Buddhist consciousness of the working class. In addition, the propaganda of an earlier period on the Aryan origin of the Sinhalese, which had not been stressed by working-class leaders of the 1920's was not only received, but was also given a new lease of life in the context of the rising tide of Fascism in Europe.

The fact that the working-class was able to adopt such ideologies, forgetting very quickly the feelings of class solidarity that had been built up during the earlier phase of joint militant action, is relevant today. It provides a pointer to the underlying strength of Sinhala Buddhist consciousness among all classes of people, which may be dormant in certain periods, but can be swiftly aroused, especially when their material survival is thought to be at stake. Moreover the power of racism to retard the growth of class consciousness, and the way in which such ideologies can be used by ruling groups for their own purposes, are some of the lessons to be learnt from a study of this phase of class and ethnic consciousness in Sri Lanka.

6. POLITICAL RIGHTS OF PLANTATION WORKERS (1928 - 1948)

From the 1930's to the present day, the history of the plantation sector in Sri Lanka has been a grim record of the denial of economic and social justice and basic democratic rights to the largest section of the island's working-class, namely the workers of Indian origin, whose labour on tea and rubber plantations provided the country with its main exports and largest foreign exchange earnings. The onslaught was carried out through several means; by stripping the workers of their voting rights in stages - thereby depriving them of representation at local government and parliamentary level; by creating a mass of stateless persons and eventually subjecting a large section of them to what amounted to forced repatriation to India: by refusing them many of the wage, education, health and social benefits available to other sections of the population; by exposing them to the ordeal of famine conditions in the mid - 1970's, and finally by subjecting many of them to death, rape, loot and arson during periods of ethnic violence in 1977, 1981 and in July 1983.

The strategy of the political exclusion of plantation workers was spearheaded by the Sinhala bourgeoisie in the late 1920's. The Sinhala politicians used the cry of 'swamping' to avert the real threat that a class-conscious plantation proletariat might pose to the system, especially if it joined forces with other sections of Sri Lankan working people. However, although racist propaganda against the political rights of Indian workers on plantations was first raised by the Sinhala politicians in the late 1920's, the Sinhala working-class, under the social-democratic leadership of A.E. Goonesinha was at a peak period of ethnic unity and class solidarity, and *opposed discrimination against plantation workers*. When, in the 1930s and 1940's, Goonesinha's policies changed on this issue, the Left gave non-racist leadership and opposed every attempt to restrict the rights of Indian workers in the urban and plantation sectors. Thus on the question of voting and citizenship rights of the plantation

workers, the working-class parties in the period from 1928 to 1948 (first, Goonesinha's Labour Party and after had succumbed to ethnic pressures, the LSSP and the CP) firmly supported the plantation workers, while the parties of the bourgeoisie consistently campaigned for the denial of these rights. Conflicts with other non-Sinhala or non-Buddhist elements - the Christians, the Muslims and the Malayalis had flared up into violence against members of these groups. However, ethnic antagonism could lead, not only to violence against persons and property, but also, as in the case of plantation labour to violations of the fundamental human and civic rights of a minority group.

It is very revealing that although from 1830 to the 1930's the number of Indian migrants on plantations had increased significantly, the 'Indian issue' did not become a central concern of Sinhala agitation. In 1911, the Indian Tamils numbered 530,000 or 12.9% of the population of 4.1 million; the vast majority were plantation workers and their dependants, and the others were mainly traders and urban workers. By 1921, the number had risen to 602,000 of which 536,000 were plantation workers and dependants. The presence in Sri Lanka of such a large group of recent migrants might have been expected to cause open expressions of hostility. But the targets of Sinhala Buddhists, from the 1880's were other privileged minority groups, even though they were numerically much smaller than the Indian Tamils.

It would of course be wrong to say that the presence of several hundred thousand migrant workers caused no resentment among the Sinhalese. Anagarika Dharmapala often made disparaging remarks about Indian workers, complaining in 1902, for example, that 'under the English administration, the out-castes of Southern India are allowed to immigrate into the island'. Similarly, contemptuous references to plantation workers were made by Sinhalese leaders and the word 'coolie' was used derogatorily in common parlance by the English-speaking elite.

Captive Labour

The structure of the plantation system was geared to this new form of slavery. The migrant workers were subject to

various forms of oppression; to a military style, hierarchical domination by British management, to the patriarchal control of the *Kangani* or labour recruiter and to the ultimate violence of the colonial state apparatus with its police powers, repressive laws and prisons. The workers were kept in 'line' rooms on plantations and their mobility was restricted by both the estate security services and the laws of the land; their health and education levels were deplorable and wages remained, for over a century (up to 1977), at a bare subsistence rate of 33 cents for men, 25 for women and 12 for Children — per day.

However, what was crucial in terms of ethnic relations was that the Sinhalese were not competing for the same jobs as the plantation workers. One of the generally accepted myths is that Sinhala workers did not accept employment on plantations because they were not willing to be degraded to the level of 'coolies', being proud of their race, religion and status. Recent studies have shown that Sinhala peasants refused to work as wage labour on plantations because, even after the advent of plantation capitalism, they continued to have access to some land; in short, the system had not pauperised the peasantry to the extent that there were no options but to become plantation workers.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the estate Tamils were not targets of ethnic violence; nor was there agitation for their repatriation. As long as they remained a captive labour force, isolated geographically in the hills with no trade union or other type of organisation, possessing neither economic nor political rights, and posing no threat or competition in terms of employment, they could be tolerated, of their numbers.

Universal Franchise and the Indian Vote

The first concerted attack on the rights of plantation workers by the Sinhala bourgeoisie occurred when the question of universal suffrage was raised in the late 1920's during discussions.

on constitutional reform, Plantation workers were vital to the economy, but not the political process; their near slave status was accepted but the prospect of their gaining voting rights and influencing the outcome of elections resulted in a chauvinist campaign led by sections of the bourgeoisie, who stirred up fears among the Sinhalese that they would become a minority in certain electoral districts.

In the 1920's only 4% of the population had been entitled to vote at elections to the Legislative Council, the franchise being based on income, property, literacy and gender qualifications which effectively limited the franchise to a small group of middle-class males. Under this system neither the urban nor the plantation workers of Indian origin could vote, but 'Indian interests' were represented by two nominated members. In 1927, a commission on the reform of the constitution, led by Lord Donoughmore and including Dr. Drummond Shiels (of the Labour Party) made a significant recommendation that the franchise be granted to men and women over 21, stating, however, that 'the privilege of voting should be confined to those who have an abiding interest in the island'.

This far-reaching measure - the first of its kind in the British Empire - granting franchise rights to the working class and to women, also had two other important consequences; it set the stage for the political process to be enacted within the framework incorporating the future Left movement in the logistic of electoral politics; and second, it made the issue of franchise rights, the main arena of struggle for plantation workers for nearly sixty years - from 1927 to 1986,

The debate in the legislative council

The issue of universal suffrage and especially the enfranchisement of women and Indian workers aroused much public controversy in 1928. On the question of votes for the indigenous working class and for women, the local politicians were willing to give up their opposition and accept the commission's proposals; but on the issue of plantation workers, all but one of the Sinhala representatives, openly voiced fears that the Sinhalese

would be politically swamped by the Indian vote. D. S. Senanayake stated that the recommendation of the Commission which had caused the greatest alarm was the proposal to extend the franchise to Indians. He voiced the view that the Sinhalese were not only a minority in respect of Indians, but were also the victims of injustice,

The Sinhalese are....an unfortunate community....the Sinhalese have been misunderstood and even their generosity forgotten.... I do not think there is any other community like the Sinhalese who have consented to penalise themselves in order to give privileges to others....The Indians...have a big country, We have only this small bit of land for ourselves;....we want this country for ourselves. (Hansard 8 Nov, 1928; emphasis added),

Other Sinhala politicians in the Legislature expressed similar views; Francis Molamure claimed that his warnings on the 'Indian menace' were timely:

It is a question of foresight it is a question of self-preservation...we are voicing the sentiments of a good majority of the population. In the past....people referred to Ceylon as Lipton's Tea Garden; perhaps in the future people will refer to Ceylon as the Indian Banyan Tree.

Molamure clearly saw the political potential of racism as a slogan in future elections based on universal suffrage. Replying to his critics, he predicted electoral defeat for candidates advocating non-discriminatory policies.

I throw out this challenge. Let them go to the country and make this their platform cry 'send me in and I shall not make any discrimination between Ceylonese and non-Ceylonese let his opponent say 'My policy is to save Ceylon for the Ceylonese', (Hansard 15 Nov, 1928),

In this debate, C.W.W. Kannangara also referred to the menace of Indian labour which would swamp 'the permanent

population' and hinted that those who did not oppose Indian enfranchisement would be considered traitors. (Hansard 8 Nov. (1928). Another class angle on this question was given by *v. de Wickramanayake*, a member of the Legislature.

What I fear most is the Indian cooly on the estate.... rather than the Indian living in Colombo.... The Indian labourer....goes to work at 6 in the morning and returns to his cooly lines at....6 at night; what does he know of events in the Island?....therefore I say he is not fit or competent to give a vote on matters political. (Hansard 2 Nov, 1928).

The labour party and the Indian question

The one exception among the Sinhala legislative councillors was C.H.Z. Fernando, a member of the Labour Party, who for a decade had been active in support of the urban labour movement. He refuted the alarmist views on 'swamping', calling them 'unfounded in fact' and derided the 'mythical dangers of Indian domination'. However he did not underestimate the harmful possibilities of racist electioneering and in 1928, before racism had erupted among the working-class he very perceptively predicted the possibility of such a movement. Quoting Dr. W.A. de Silva President of the Ceylon Nation Congress, Fernando said,

The Congress President....stated that if it is pointed out to the masses that we want to hand over the destinies of the country to Indians who have no permanent interests here, the masses would rise up to express themselves very strongly on the subject. I quite agreethat *if anyone were to go among the masses with that cry, which I submit is not an honest cry - it would be very easy indeed to move the masses to some precipitate action* (Hansard 2 Nov. 1928; emphasis added)

Several legislators from minority communities who were, at the time, supporters of the Labour Party also warned of the

dangers of racism. These included Natesa Aiyar and A. Mahadeva, who stated 'The Labour Party says.... we want the Indians and we want them on equal terms with the Ceylonese, (Hansard 8 Nov. 1928).

Although not in the Labour Party himself, T. B. Jayah (a Malay) supported franchise rights for plantation labour and claimed 'The Labour Party is strongly in favour of the grant of the franchise to the Indian community. Their accredited leader says that *the Sinhalese labourer will not stand in the way of the grant of the franchise to his Indian brother*' (Hansard 8 Nov. 1928, emphasis added).

The 'accredited leader' A. E. Goonesinha, who was at the height of his power not only as Colombo's trade unionist but also as leader of the Ceylon Labour Party, supported the franchise rights of Indian workers, since his policies were based on class solidarity and ethnic unity. While sections of the Sinhala press were stirring up racist propaganda, A. E. Goonesinha, in 1928, chaired a meeting of the Gandhi sangham in price park and came out in favour of Indian worker's rights, condemning the policies of the Sinhala leaders.

A few plutocrats spoke of the Indians as being a menace to the Sinhalese workmen. What had these conscientious patriotic plutocrats done.... for their workmen in their times of trouble and hardships? Instead of helping their poor fellow countrymen, the plutocrats had expended their energies in driving out the poor villager from his plot of land. Now these men had developed a sense of patriotism: What was the reason for this solicitude? It was the result of the poor man being given the vote. It was the same plutocrats who went before the Special Commission and opposed.... the grant of universal suffrage. Having failed in their scheme they now talk of depriving Indians in Ceylon of the right to vote (*Ceylon Daily News*, 10 September 1928)

The courageous stand that A. E. Goonesinha took in those years, risking criticism and unpopularity by championing the rights

of the plantation workers, was in stark contrast to his complete change of position on minority rights in the thirties.

The Elections

When the amended reforms were finally implemented, the franchise was given to those with a Ceylon domicile of origin or choice based on 5 years residence, literacy, property and income qualifications or the possession of certificate of permanent settlement, given to those with 5 years continuous residence and intention to settle in the country. Under this law, a section of plantation workers were able, for the first time, to exercise franchise rights.

During the first general elections in 1931, there was considerable political campaigning in the Plantation areas. Two candidates of Indian origin were elected-S.P. Vytilingam (Tala-wakelle) and Peri Sunderam (Hatton), who became the Minister of Labour, Industry and Commerce in the new State Council. There was renewed political agitation in plantation areas in 1936, when the number of Indian voters had risen to 145,000. At the general election in 1936 the two members were S. P. Vytilingam (Talawakelle) and the trade union leader, K. Natesa Aiyar (Hatton) as general elections were to be held every five years, there was active preparation for the anticipated 1941 elections, (which were postponed because of the World War). By this date, the Indian electorate had risen to 225,000 and the election enthusiasm which had spread to the plantation sector also led to a political awakening which facilitated the spread of trade unionism after 1939.

Denial of Village Franchise

The grant of the franchise, (even with certain limitations) to plantation workers, and their keenness to register and vote, led to feelings of apprehension among Sinhala political leaders. Having failed to disfranchise this group at the parliamentary level, and effort was thereafter launched to deny them the franchise at local government level.

Under the Village Committees Ordinance of 1889, participation in elections to these committees was denied to Eur-

opeans, Burghers and Indians, on the ground that they did not form an organic part of village life. In 1937, the law was amended to impose a tax on estates within the village areas, and to give village franchise to Burghers and Europeans, but not to Indians, thereby excluding these workers from the share in local government.

There were loud protests over this legislation; many Indian associations in Sri Lanka accused the State Council of trying to deprive Indians of their political rights and the government of India alleged that the Bill was based on racial discrimination Dr. N. M. Perera, the LSSP member in the State Council, made an attack on the policies of the Board of Ministers.

They have no objection to enfranchising European planters.... Those.... who have property, who exploit the people in the true sense of the word are enfranchised. But when it comes to the poor labourer who has not the fortune to possess land, he is not enfranchised.... This bogey of swamping is entirely imaginary and has been created by a handful of people.... the interests of the Indian labourers and the vast mass of peasants and workers in this country are the same. The fight is against the capitalist class, whether they are Indians or Ceylonese. (Hansard 1937, p 4150 emphasis added.)

As a result of the protests there was another amendment depriving *all* plantation labour, irrespective of ethnic origin of the village franchise. However, since there were only a few Sinhala residents on estates, the effect of the legislation was to discriminate against Indian workers.

The Ban on Migration

The uncertainties faced by the Indian minorities in Sri Lanka (Malayali and Tamil) were aggravated in the late 1930's, when measures were passed enforcing retirement and repatriation of urban workers of Indian origin. Continuing employment also led to a discussion on the issue of migration (from India) for work on plantations, which was vital for the functioning of

this key sector of the economy. Ironically, the Sinhala bourgeoisie which had campaigned for the repatriation of urban labour, (said to be in competition with Sinhala workers) was against the banning of immigration from India for work on estates, since it went against the interests of the plantation economy. However, the Indian government in 1939, in retaliation for the repatriation of urban labour, banned immigration from India.

Militancy of Plantation Workers

The unionisation and subsequent militant struggles of plantation workers were also factors in increasing Sinhala fear about the potential political influence of these workers. K. Natesa Aiyar had formed the first plantation trade union in 1931, but this never made rapid strides due to adverse economic conditions during the depression. By the late 1930's however, the situation had changed; the Lanka Sama Samaja Party started organising plantation workers and led some very militant strikes in 1939 and 1940, against which the employers retaliated with violence. The Ceylon Indian Congress, inaugurated with Nehru's patronage in 1939, also began trade union activity, organising a wave of strikes, which set the whole of the hill country ablaze in 1940. The planters were caught off their guard, having for generations been used to 'docile coolies'; the colonial officials were also alarmed at the unrest which occurred after the outbreak of the Second World War. Recognition was hastily given to the unions and a collective agreement was signed in 1940, between the unions and the Planters' Associations.

The sudden eruption of violence and labour agitation on the plantations also unnerved the Sinhala leaders, who began to see the 'dangers' of an organised plantation proletariat, having links with the Left parties. Alarms about the 'red peril' were further sounded after the end of the World War, when urban labour, led by the Left, erupted in a series of militant strikes in 1945 and 1946 culminating in the general strike of 1947; the spectacle of joint revolutionary agitation, involving plantation and urban labour, was to further haunt the bourgeoisie, after the

unforeseen successes of the Left parties in the parliamentary elections of 1947, when their representation increased (from 2 at the previous election of 1936 to 20) and Dr. N. M. Perera of the LSSP became the leader of the Opposition.

The "Indian menace" and the "Red peril"

In the post-independence phase of Sri Lanka's history, the Sinhala bourgeoisie, which in 1947, had formed its own multi-ethnic party the United National Party, entered into a new phase of its existence, when it began to consolidate its class position in the face of threats from the Left.

In the colonial period, the presence of the British had kept communal and religious conflicts from flaring up to violent proportions, the last occasion of serious violence being the anti-Muslim riots in 1915. However, in the 1930's ethnic tension against minorities had built up and by the time of Independence in 1948, Sinhalese of all classes were being prepared for the next round of 'holy wars' - based on ethnicity, language and religion - to be waged against the non-Sinhala non-Buddhist section of the population; the first attack, only six months after independence, was on the political rights of persons of Indian origin resident in Sri Lanka, who by 1953 numbered 974,000 (12% of a total population of 8 million), the majority being plantation workers and their dependents.

This phase of ethnic antagonism in Sri Lanka began with the introduction of legislation sponsored by the Sinhala bourgeoisie - with the support of vested interests of other ethnic groups - against the most exploited and oppressed section of the working-class. The legislation of 1948-9 denying citizenship and franchise rights to the Indian Tamils of Sri Lanka, was both blatantly racist and anti-working class, achieving simultaneously the long-standing objectives of the Sri Lanka bourgeoisie to reduce the political influence of these workers as a class and as minority, while keeping them in economic subordination.

Citizenship Acts

When the country obtained independence, in February 1948, the constitution which was in force (based on the Soulbury reforms) did not define citizenship, a singular and international omission. In August 1948, the Ceylon Citizenship Act provided that citizenship was to be determined either by descent or by stringent conditions of registration, including proof of three generations of paternal ancestry in Sri Lanka, but providing for citizenship to be conferred by the government on persons for distinguished service to the professions, commerce etc. An Emigrants Act was also passed in August 1948, and the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act of 1949 was introduced in December 1948 to grant citizenship by registration on certain restrictive conditions, including residence and income.

As Kodikara has observed, the Citizenship Acts "conferred automatically and without formality the status of citizenship by descent on the indigenous elements of Ceylon's population, i.e. on Sinhalese Ceylon Tamils, Ceylon Moors and Burghers," but the number of Indians who could claim citizenship under the Act was "infinitesimal in proportion to the Indian population in the island". (Kodikara 1965, 112.113). These acts were followed by a Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Act which amended the electoral laws, confining the vote only to citizens, thus bringing to a conclusion the legal manoeuvres of the Sinhala majority to exclude the plantation workers from citizenship, thereby disenfranchising the largest section of the working-class.

The consciousness of the Sinhala bourgeoisie in 1948

In debates on these three Acts the Sinhala leaders were to voice the main fears and suspicions of the Sinhala bourgeoisie about the presence of persons of Indian origin in Sri Lanka. These attitudes can be summarised under two heads, the first symptomatic of their consciousness as ethnic Sinhalese and the second of their consciousness as a bourgeoisie, with class interests that needed to be protected. Among the first set of attitudes, shared by both the bourgeoisie and the large majority of Sinhala people were the following:

1. The fear of being 'swamped' - it was argued that if the Indians obtained citizenship and therefore the right to vote, they would be a majority in some electorates in the plantation areas and would return Indian members to parliament, as they did in 1947. In addition, it was feared that the Indian vote had been decisive in another 14 electorates which had returned Left candidates. The victims of this 'swamping' would be the Sinhalese in general and the Kandyans in particular and fears were expressed that Kandyans would not be adequately represented in Parliament as a result. The picture of a helpless, landless Kandyan peasantry was often evoked in these debates, and it was said that this economically dispossessed segment of the population would be politically unrepresented and that their grievances would therefore not be adequately represented or solved.

2. Behind this fear was that of an everpresent 'Indian threat'. Sinhalese leaders expressed the fear that Indians had expansionist designs on Sri Lanka and wished to fill the vacuum created by the withdrawal of the British. Indians in Sri Lanka were, in this view, regarded as a 'fifth column'. These fears were given fresh substance in 1948, when the Indian government took action, including military force, to make Hyderabad and other princely states join the Indian Union.

* * * *

The class fears of the Sinhala bourgeoisie regarding Indian workers were another component of its consciousness. The political parties of the bourgeoisie feared the joining of forces between the working-classes of all communities, including the plantation workers, which would pose a threat to their power in the future. As noted earlier these fears were reinforced by the wave of serious strikes that had occurred in both the plantation and the urban areas in the post-war years - a period when there was genuine concern at the prospect of a revolutionary upheaval. In addition, the revolutionary movements in China and Vietnam and armed struggles in Malaysia and Burma, together with the 'line of struggle' launched by the Indian Communist Party in 1948, gave credence to fears of possible revolution in Sri Lanka.

The UNP had been surprised by the 1947 election results, obtaining a minority of 42 out of 95 seats; the Left obtaining 20 and the Ceylon Indian Congress (CIC) 7 seats. The UNP had to attract several of the 21 independent members to its side to form a government. Since the CIC voted mainly with the opposition, there was also a belief among Sinhala ruling politicians that the Left posed a major threat to the system, and that the Indian vote had gone to Sinhala Left candidates in many constituencies.

This congruence of ethnic and class consciousness was supported by a whole host of prejudices. The Indian workers, both in the plantations and in the urban sectors were portrayed as poor, illiterate, degraded and immoral and therefore unfit for the vote. In addition, it was suggested that 'Ramasamy' and 'Meenachchi' the contemptuous stereotype reference to Indian workers, were basically uninterested in the vote and that the agitation for giving them citizenship and franchise rights was being conducted by designing politicians.

The Debates of 1948 - the 'Threat' from India

It is in the light of these attitudes to the 'Indian menace' and the 'Red peril' that the Sinhala politicians introduced the Citizenship Acts, which excluded the Indian working-class in Sri Lanka from the political process. Twenty years previously D. S. Senanayake, the member for Mirigama, had opposed Indian franchise and had clearly expressed his views about the 'Indian menace'. In 1948, in presenting the first Bill on citizenship, D. S. Senanayake, the Prime Minister, faced with an aggressive opposition in parliament, was more reticent and only made a short speech, merely describing its provisions, giving no explanation for its introduction:

It is quite a simple Bill, but a very important Bill. We are not prejudicing the interests of anyone; We are only trying to confer Ceylon citizenship on people in Ceylon who are not citizens of another country.... It is necessary that we should have our own citizenship laws, (Hansard, 19 Aug. 1948).

The Minister of Food, A. Ratnayaka, who was a Kandyan, was more outspoken — he expressed the grievances of the Kandyan peasantry and openly gave vent to fears of Indian domination. He alleged that the Ceylon Indian Congress leaders, S. Thondaman had a 'vision of Ceylon, federated with India, dominated by India, overwhelmed by India' and added:

I am myself inspired by a 'fear complex'.... we are afraid and that is why we feel that we have to restrict the composition of our nationals.... I fear that the freedom we have won is already in danger — in great danger. It is in danger from within (Hansard, 19 Aug. 1948).

In the next round, presenting the India and Pakistani Residents Bill, D. S. Senanayake was more forthcoming and spoke on the question of India. He made the usual gestures; 'our attachment to India, our close association with India . . . make us feel that it is very necessary for us to be in close friendship with that country', but added, 'we may be a small country, but however small we may be, we have a right to our country . . . We do not expect India to play the role of trying to establish rights where they have no rights, or privileges where they have no privileges or to try to deprive other countries of their rights' (Hansard 9 Dec. 1948).

In this debate S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, who was a Minister in the UNP government, stressed his friendship and respect for Jawaharlal Nehru and added :

We want to be friendly with the great continent of India. There is so much we have to admire in India and look up to India. We would be friends, but friends on what terms? On terms of betrayal of our own people? Never, never, never can friendship be based on a betrayal of our people (Hansard 20 Aug. 1948).

The Left, however, had a different view of India; many of them, N. M. Perera, Colvin R. de Silva and others had spent the war years in India after the banning of the LSSP and their

escape from jail in Colombo. They had worked with the Indian Left movement and regarded the Indians in Sri Lanka as allies in the class struggle rather than as a potential danger, Dr. N. M. Perera, in criticising the legislation, said 'The Prime Minister suffers from two diseases; one is Indophobia and other is Anglomania (Hansard, 19 Aug. 1948).

Racism and Class

When the Citizenship Bills were debated in Parliament in August and December 1948, the leaders of the Left parties exposed the racist and class motivations of the legislation. Dr. N. M. Perera of the LSSP alleged that the legislation embodied the principles of 'racialism and exclusiveness' and stated :

I thought that racialism of this type ended with Houston Chamberlain and Adolph Hitler....I did not believe it possible that any person claiming to be a statesman.... would ask us to accede to a Bill of this nature....we cannot proceed as if we are God's chosen race quite apart from the rest of the world; that we and we alone have the right to be the citizens of this country.

Speaking on the income restrictions regarding citizenship Perera pointed to the racial bias in the proposed law,

If an unemployed so-called Sinhalese man is fit enough to get rights, why should an Indian who has no income be deprived of those rights? If that is the criterion, is that not racial prejudice of the worst type?.... *Racial prejudice does not come from the bottom. It always comes from the top.* (Hansard, 10 Dec. 1948 Emphasis added).

Dr. Colvin R. de Silva of the BLP (Bolshevik Leninist Party) spoke on links between racism and reaction. Describing the bill as one of the blackest deeds of the government which had a 'thoroughly black record, and praising those who had opposed the bill for having taken steps against 'the campaign of race-

mongering that has disgraced the political life of this country,' he stated.

If you look at the background....the political motivation and social objectives of this Bill - it will be found that it is a classic piece of sustained reactionism. Racialism is a handy weapon of reaction. This bill is another dig with a racial spade to make a future grave for universal adult franchise.

De Silva predicted that 'the moment the government starts applying an anti-racial principle against a particular group' this would lead to discrimination against other minorities 'who are today accepted as Ceylonese' (Hansard 19 Aug. 1948).

However several Sinhala politicians took an overtly racial stand on this issue and did not hide their prejudices. A notable example was T. F. Jayewardena who, taunting the opposition, said ;

If some of the members of the opposition had the same depth of feeling for their own people as they have for their cochchi sahodarayas (Malayali comrades) they will agree with me that 40 males living in a house with 4 or 5 Tamil or Sinhalese women are hardly the type of people who are to be encouraged to become citizens of Ceylon (Hansard, 10 Dec. 1948)

While some were preoccupied with morality, it was left to A. E. Goonesinha, the labour leader who had been appointed Minister without Portfolio in the UNP government, to clearly enunciate the economic basis for his admitted racist stand. Replying to T. B. Subasinghe of the LSSP, who had denounced the Bill as racist and also used the occasion to make allegations of racism against him, Goonesinha said :

If for the protection of the interests of the national of this country, the interests of hundreds of thousands of workers of this country, I have to be racial *then I am indeed racial and I shall continue to be racial.*

On this occasion Goonesinha made revealing statements on the changes in trade union policy, directly due to the economic depression which began in the late 1920s.

In accordance with labour policy and principles of trade unionism we had practically every Indian workers, except those working on estates, in our unions. *But in the year 1929, when the problem of unemployment confronted us we had to re-examine the whole position. We decided that the interests of the nationals of this country had to be protected,* that jobs should be found for them before we invited or accepted people from other countries. (Hansard 10 Dec. 1984 Emphasis added).

Commenting on the racist political campaigns in his constituency (Colombo Central), during the elections held under universal suffrage in the 1930s, he candidly remarked :

I have a handicap of 10 000 votes to my good friend Mr. T. B. Jayah and said that I would not accept any Indian vote because I believe that the Indians should be repatriated because our own people are without employment (ibid).

The main thrust of the Left argument in the parliamentary debate was that the largest single sector of the working-class was being deprived of basic democratic rights. The Sinhala bourgeoisie was accused of cynically arousing racist fears in order to attack a key section of the workers, who were a potential political threat to the Government.

The Communist Party stressed the class bias of the legislation. Its main speaker in parliament Pieter Keuneman, while claiming that the legislation 'operated to favour of the rich and educated and militated against the poor people, the working people of this country', emphasised that class, more than race, was the main determinant.

We are opposed to this Bill because of certain class considerations involved....the real bias is against the working-class Indians. It is far more a class question that arises.... The very fundamental theory of this Bill is false....

The way it is, is to discriminate against a class and to see that the political structure of the UNP government is maintained under the plea of giving citizenship to the people of this country (Hansard, 19 Aug. 1948).

Harry Abeygoonewardena, the Communist Party Secretary, condemned the view that the Indian workers were a 'fifth column of the government of India' and said :

" We look upon them as an ally and a section of the working-class of Ceylon who will fight for the establishment of a socialist state in Ceylon'.

Taking a broader view of the question he added that the citizenship legislation was one of a series of repressive laws passed by the government including the Public Security Ordinance, the Police Ordinance and the Trade Union Ordinance.

This bill is not against one section of the working classes who are called Indians, but....against the working people of Ceylon including the Ceylonese labourers....This is another step taken by the government to entrench itself in power and to deprive the working people of this country of their rights and to divide the working people (Hansard, 10 Dec. 1948).

In this debate Colvin R. de Silva of the BLP also stressed the class angle and said :

There is the cloven hoof of the class approach peeping from under the mantle of an impartial citizenship principle....in defining the principle of citizenship what this government has kept in the forefront of its mind is neither human justice nor social justice, but precisely restriction in the interests of a particular class. (Hansard, 19 Aug. 1948).

Similarly, Robert Gunewardena of the LSSP also denounced the 'shameless legislation designed to deny citizenship to a section of the working-class which produces the wealth of the country'. Dr. N. M. Perera accused the government of being

afraid that 'a possible unity of the Sinhalese proletariat with the Indian proletariat would be the death knell of the local bourgeoisie'. (Hansard, 19 Aug. 1948) He alleged that the government were doing 'a grave injustice to a large section of... the working-class and said that the laws were 'openly anti working-class deliberately designed against the Indian working-class and that class alone' (Hansard 10 Dec. 1948).

Other viewpoints

Apart from the race and class aspects enunciated during the debate by the Sinhala bourgeoisie and the Left, there were other shades of opinion voiced on this occasion. While the Ceylon Indian Congress M.P.s expressed strong view on the injustices done to those of Indian origin in Sri Lanka, the other minority members of parliament did not share the same concern. The voting on the first citizenship bill was 53 for and 35 against and on the second, 52/32; the pattern of voting was very much on class lines which cut across ethnicity.

On the first Citizenship Act in August 1948, the two Tamil Ministers in the UNP government, C. Sunderalingam and C. Sittampalam voted with the government but refrained from speaking in the debate, while the Tamil Congress, led by G. G. Ponnambalam, and including SJV Chelvanayakam voted against; but Sunderalingam, who had serious reservations about the question, resigned from the government and G. G. Ponnambalam was made a Minister soon after. When it came to voting on the Indian Residents Act in December 1948, Ponnambalam voted for the bill, while Chelvanayakam of the Tamil Congress continued to vote against. Other minority members voting for the bill included the Minister, T. B. Jayah (who had supported Indian franchise rights in 1928), independents such as S. U. Ethirimansingham V. Nalliah and A.L. Thambiyah, (who had been an ally, of Goonesinha in the labour Party in the late 1920's), and Tamil Congress members K. Kanagarathnam and T. Ramalingam. Several UNP Muslim members - H.S. Ismail, M.S. Kariapper and A. L. Sinnalebbe - as well as M. M. Ibrahim (an independent, who later joined the UNP) voted with the government, as did the European appointed members (P. H. Griffith, Major J.W. Oldfield, S.A. Pakeman and

E. E. Spencer) and the Burgher appointed member, (J. A. Martensz).

However, even on the government benches, there were some who had reservations about the bill, the best example being the Minister for Home Affairs, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, who two years later left the UNP to form the SLFP. In winding up the debate on the citizenship bill, he distanced himself from the Government:

From my point of view - I say from my personal point of view - these provisions go further than I would have liked personally. Though I support them in the interests of statesmanship and wisdom and in the interest of peace, I would have preferred the problem to be approached from another angle.

Bandaranaike's 'angle' was that once it was decided that a 'safe absorbable maximum of Indian workers were needed' they should be given full rights and the fullest amenities of labour in this country: those who wanted to return to India were to be given 'fair and just and if necessary, generous terms'. Expressing the hope that Sri Lankans would in the future work on plantations, he added "I am sure that the people of this country are capable of working and managing the estates under suitable conditions of labour...."

The voting on the Indian and Pakistan residents (Citizenship) Act December 1948.

Ayes 5'

Hon. Mr. D. S. Senanayake	C. E. Attgalle	J. W. Oldfield
Hon. Mr. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike	Ivan T. Dasanaiké G.A. de Zoysa	S. A. Pakeman
Hon. Mr. A. E. Goonesinha	Mudaliyar M. M. Ebrahim	T. B. Panabokke Albert F. Peiris
Hon. Mr. T. B. Jayah		
Hon. Mr. J. R. Jayewardene	S.W. Ethirimansingham	T. B. Poholiyadde Dissawa
Hon. Mr. E. A. Nugawela	J. J. Fernando	H. R. U. Premachandra

Hon. Mr. G. G. Ponnambalam	F. H. Griffith	T. Ramalinkam
Hon. Mr. A. Ratnayake	D. S. Goone-sekera	J. A. Rambukpota
Hon. Mr. Dudley Senanayake	Mudaliyar D.P. Jayasuriya	V.G.W. Ratnayake
M.D. Banda		H. L. Ratwatte
P. B. Bulankul-lame Dissawa	T.F. Jayewardena	M. Senanayake
G. R. de Silva	Major Montague Jayawickrema	A. Sinnalebbe
H.S. Ismail	D. D. Karunaratne	E. E. Spencer
A. P. Jayasooriya	N. H. Keerthiratne	K.V.D. Sugathadasa
K. Kanagaratnam	S. H. Mahadiulwewa	H. B. Tenne
Mudaliyar M. S. Kariapper		A. L. Thambiayah
V. Nalliah	J. Aubrey Martensz	V. T. Nanayakkara
E. W. Mathew	H. de Z. Siriwardena	
H. W. Amarasuriya		

Noes 32

H. D. Abeygoonawardena	J. C. T. Kotalewela	D. Ramanujam
Somaweera	P. Kumarasiri	Florence Senanayake
Chandrasire	K. Kumaravelu	S. A. Silva
S. J. V. Chelvanayakam		
W. Dahanayake	G. R. Motha	S. Sivapalan
Colvin R. de Silva	M. H. Peiris	T. B. Subasinghe
P. H. W. de Silva	R. S. Pelpola	S. M. Subbiah
S. Thondaman		A. Reginald Perera
Goonewardena	N. M. Perera	C. Vanniasingam
Cholmondeley	Wilmot A. Perera	S. V. Velupillai
P. B. R. Gunawardena		
Kusumsiri	K. Rajalingam	W.P.A. Wickremasinghe
Gunawardena		I.M.R.A. Iriyagolla
D.F. Hettiarachchi	L. Rajapaksa	

this is that we would have liked, this is what Pandit Nehru.... mentioned to me". (Hansard 20 Aug. 1948)

The other interesting point to note is that many independent members of parliament who were (or were to become) well-known political figures, also voted against the bill, along with the LSSP, BLP, CP and CIC. They were Lakshman Rajapakse, Wilmot Perera, R. S. Pelpola. I. M. R. A. Iriyagolla and H. Sri Nissanka: the latter, a leading Buddhist stated 'I am not in a position to vote upon a measure which ignores the first principle of law.... The Method of approach to the solution of this difficult problem might have been different' (Hansard 20 Aug 1948).

Elections and Satyagraha

When parliament was dissolved and new elections were scheduled in 1952, based on the 1950 register, from which the preponderant majority of Indians were excluded, the Ceylon Indian Congress launched a campaign to obtain voting rights for those Indians who had opted, under the law, to become citizens of Sri Lanka. The agitation included *satyagraha* offered by Congress leaders outside the Prime Minister's office. A meeting at the Town Hall on August 5th 1952, to mark the 100th day of the campaign, united the opposition parties. Colvin R. de Silva said that the disenfranchising of an important section of the people should be the concern, not only of the CIC, but of every community and emphasised the need for working-class solidarity. Philip Gunawardena condemned the treatment meted out to Indian plantation labour as 'most unjust, unfair and inhuman'. Representative of the Communist Party, (Pieter Keuneman), Federal Party (S. J. V. Chelvanayakam) and plantation labour leaders, (S. Thondaman and A. Aziz) also spoke on this occasion.

One should also note that a section of the Buddhist clergy supported the rights of plantation labour and the *satyagraha* campaign. K. Indasara Thero on behalf of 29 bhikkus of the Prabuddha Bhikshu Mandalaya of Gampola appealed to the Prime Minister :

It is our earnest wish that as an enlightened statesman, and a Buddhist called upon to guide the destinies of Lanka at such a critical time, you will view the whole matter not in a formal or legal manner, but from the human angle.... The Indians who are here are a vital part of the agriculture and industry of our land. Moreover they were brought here by the British rulers of old and have directly or indirectly helped the development of our land. It seems a gross injustice to treat them now as unwanted foreigners. Our country is utilising their services to maintain our economy. Let us then give them the fundamental rights they are appealing for. (*Congress News* 26 May, 1952.)

In 1952, the new Prime Minister (Dudley Senanayake) openly displayed the class and race bias of the bourgeoisie when he frankly boasted that the UNP had succeeded in, 'liquidating the Indian menace in Ceylon by the simple device of denying the vote to Ramasamy and Meenachchi' (*Congress News* 12 May 1952). However, during these years of blatant anti-working class and anti-minority legislation, the Left leadership stressed class rather than ethnic consciousness. Progressive ideology was still able to resist the temptation to adopt racist policies and it is to the credit of the Sinhala working-class and its leaders, that they determinedly supported the rights of minorities upto the 1960, when they were pressured into changing the policies.

The elements of Sinhala—Buddhist consciousness which formed the ideological basis for discrimination and violence against minority ethnic groups were also marshalled in the campaign against plantation labour. The assumption behind the movement for depriving the plantation workers of citizenship and voting rights was that the Sinhalese were the original and rightful inhabitants of Sri Lanka 'in whom alone lay the right to give or to take away minority rights. Plantation Tamils were seen as the latest manifestation of incursions from India' which had been resisted for so long by the Sinhalese: this concept was advanced at an ideological level in appeals to the Sinhala Masses 'arousing fears of India threatening the country exter-

nally and internally' but was significantly not allowed to interfere with the supply of necessary labour to the plantations. Racism could be used to mobilise the Sinhalese against the democratic rights of the workers of Indian Origin, but in the last analysis, as long as the plantation economy needed cheap labour, the class interests of the bourgeoisie prevailed.

-an attitude which began among of the petty bourgeoisie, but was to sweep all classes by the 1980s.

7. FROM SINHALA ONLY TO ETHNIC VIOLENCE

In the years up to 1950, various ethnic and religious groups had become the victims of attacks by Sinhala Buddhists of different classes. The Sinhala Buddhist bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie had challenged Christian hegemony in the late 19th century, trading and merchant elements of the petty bourgeoisie had let loose violence against the Muslims in 1915, and the Sinhala working-class, with support from sections of the Sinhala urban petty bourgeoisie and intelligentsia, had shown hostility to the Malayalis in the 1930s. After independence, chauvinist attitudes became further aggravated with the Sinhala bourgeoisie taking the lead in depriving the working-class of Indian origin of both citizenship and franchise rights. In this case, racist policies were also class-biased manoeuvres to weaken the labour movement.

One minority, relatively untouched however by communal and religious violence, had been the Sri Lanka Tamils, who in 1953, numbered 885,000 or almost 11% of the population of 10.6 million. This group had been in Sri Lanka for (probably) as long or longer than those calling themselves Sinhalese and were, on occasion, regarded by the Sinhalese, as 'sons of the soil'. In fact, it should be stressed that the early chauvinist propaganda of the Sinhala Buddhists had been directed mainly against those defined as *foreign* religious and *foreign* ethnic groups, the attacks had focussed not only on alien administrators but also on alien traders and workers said to be denying the Sinhalese their just rights and opportunities for trade and employment. The targets were therefore not Sri Lanka Tamils but Bohras, Sindis, Parsis, Coast Moors, Malayalis and Christians who were directly pinpointed as 'enemies' as well as the British administrators and missionaries who were accused of 'Christianising' the country, thereby endangering the Sinhala language and Buddhist culture. This was to change in the mid-1950s, and for the next thirty years, the armoury of Sinhala Buddhist-chauvinists was turned on the Sri Lanka Tamil people who were rediscovered to be the 'traditional' of the Sinhalese

Language as an Issue

The language rights of the Sinhalese and Tamils, a question that came to the forefront in the 1950s was the basic issue around which antagonism manifested itself. In Sri Lanka in 1953 'almost 60% of the people (over 3 years of age) spoke only Sinhala and just over 20% only Tamil. However, the Sinhala population amounted to 70% and the Tamil-speaking population (Sri Lanka Tamils, Indian Tamils and Muslims) amounted to around 30% of the population'. Apart from an insignificant number (0.2%) who spoke English only, the whole population was linguistically divided into two groups, Sinhala and Tamil speaking. (Kearney, 1967:17)

The anomaly of continuing to conduct the administration in English, which was understood only by a fraction of the population, led to campaigns for a more democratic language policy. Since a knowledge of English was confined to those who had gone to urban schools, the issue was also a class question. The privileged segment of the population with an English education, commanded the highest administrative and professional jobs and this group also dominated all political movements. In this context, the most aggrieved were the Sinhala and Tamil educated intelligentsia, who resented their exclusion, even after independence, from prestigious occupations, and became vociferous in articulating their views on the language issue. In the colonial context, the agitation for Sinhala and Tamil language rights had been put forward by both the left and the more nationalist elements of the bourgeoisie. When the Lanka Sam Samaja Party was formed in 1935, one of its fundamental objectives included the demand for the use of Sinhala and Tamil in the lower courts, at police stations and in government departments.

With the democratisation of political life through universal franchise and the expansion of the education in Sinhala and Tamil, the language issue was frequently discussed in the 1940s, and the main political leaders of the time, were willing to

espouse the cause of both languages as official language, For example, in 1944, J. R. Jayewardene had proposed that Sinhala be made the official language 'within a reasonable number of years': this was amended to include Tamil and by 27 to 2 votes, it was decided to recommend that Sinhala and Tamil be the official languages for school instruction, public service examinations and legislative proceedings. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike in 1944 remarked 'I have no personal objection to both these languages being considered official languages, nor do I see any particular harm of danger or real difficulty from this.'

After independence, an official Languages Commission was appointed to decide on procedures for making both Sinhala and Tamil official languages. In 1951, after S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike broke away from the UNP to form the SLEP, he alleged that the UNP had delayed action on the language question and the first manifesto of the SLEP declared :

It is most essential that Sinhalese and Tamil be adopted as official languages immediately so that the people of this land may cease to be aliens in their own land; so that an end may be put to the iniquity of condemning those educated in Sinhalese and Tamil to occupy the lowliest walks of life (Quoted in Kearney, 1967 : 65)

Although language was not the cause of any great agitation at the 1952 elections, during the period of Sri John Kotelawala's premiership (1953—1956), this question became the dominant issue of the day. Because of the build-up of this agitation, there was a swift change from the progressive demand for the use of both Sinhala and Tamil, to a chauvinist cry for Sinhala to be the only official language; political competition for the support of the masses played a key role in this process. Between 1953 and 1956, the 'Sinhala Only' cry swept the country and arguments about being 'swamped', this time linguistically, were used in favour of Sinhala being proclaimed the only official language, to the exclusion of Tamil.

Political parties felt obliged to take a stand on this issue and in some cases, to change their Policies. The SLFP by

1955, had officially switched to a 'Sinhala Only' line; the UNP leadership was committed to parity and in 1954, Sir John Kotelawala visited Jaffna and reiterated support for this position; however, faced with mounting agitation, the UNP also changed sides and by January 1956, had adopted a resolution that 'Sinhala alone should be made the State language'.

Revivalism in a post-colonial period

In the early 1950's Sri Lanka went through a new upsurge of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, based not only on the language question but also on religious fervour. The two issues, language and religion, were combined in the Sinhala mass consciousness not only by various mythic and symbolic factors, but also because Sinhala was the linguistic medium by which Buddhism was 'reproduced' among the Sinhalese. The Buddhist resurgence during this period was inspired by the preparations for Buddha Jayanthi - the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's death. The feeling of dissatisfaction that Buddhism was still not given its due place in independent Sri Lanka was frequently articulated and this discontent was expressed in the famous report of the All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress in 1956, entitled 'The Betrayal of Buddhism'. In this document, an open denunciation was made of political leaders who were "completely dominated by an alien outlook and values and estranged from their national history and culture."

Another publication in 1953 reflecting this revivalist trend was **The Revolt in the Temple** by D. C. Vijayavardhane, in which openly chauvinistic sentiments were expressed in a rambling book of 700 pages, discussing all manner of topics; the main concern was however the 'sacred rights' of the Sinhalese: re-emphasising some of the pronouncements of Anagarika Dharamapala forty years earlier ;

The history of Lanka is the history of the Sinhalese race.... The Sinhalese people were entrusted 2500 years ago, with a great and noble charge, the preservation.... of Buddhism..... in 1956 will occur the unique three fold event - the completion of 2500 years of Ceylon's history, of the life of the Sinhalese and of Buddhism (Vijayavardhana 1953: 25-27)

Legend and superstition were put forward as historical fact, which went unchallenged by the Sinhala intelligentsia of the period.

Thus did it happen that, on the very day the Lord died at Kusinara, Vijaya of the Solar race and his band of seven hundred followers of Sinhapura, in pursuance of the design of the Master, and of the gods, landed in Ceylon and so helped to found in Lanka what thereafter came to be known as the Sinhalese race.

The birth of the Sinhalese race would thus seem to have been not a mere chance, not an accidental occurrence, but a predestined event of high important purpose. The nation seemed destined, as it were, from its rise, primarily to carry aloft for fifty centuries the Torch that was lit by the great World-Mentor twenty-five centuries ago. (ibid 32)

However, the totally romanticised and unhistorical view of the past based on mythology, fantasy and racial 'destiny' is also seen in the author's references to the 'Aryan Sinhalese', alleged descendants of Prince Vijaya, who were 'Sinhalese' even before their arrival in the island :

Most of these people were Sinhalese in heart and mind before they left their motherland. They brought with them, within them, rather the ripened fruit of centuries of civilization, literature and art, poetry and music : and Aryan culture was bodily transported to create and enrich the virgin civilization of Sri Lanka. (ibid:31)

It may be noted in passing that the persistence in a post-colonial era, of prejudices and misconceptions of an earlier colonial period of nascent nationalism is certainly evidence for the non-development, during these years, of a rationalist consciousness among the majority of the Sinhala people.

Class And Language

In Sri Lanka, language was mainly connected with certain class interests of the petty bourgeoisie for the bourgeoisie

swabasha (i.e. the use of one's own language was not an important class issue and their leaders had no particular reason to get agitated on the question; they were fluent in English and able to get by Sinhales or Tamil as well. The reactions to the language issue among the various political leaders showed that while advocating *swabasha*, they were not emotionally committed to the exclusive slogan of 'Sinhala Only.' For example, in 1944, J. R. Jayewardene was quite prepared to accept an amendment, adding Tamil to his proposal to make Sinhala the official language, and up to 1954. S.W.R D Bandaranaike, as well as John Kotalawela had advocated the parity of official languages. It was only when languages became a means of gaining political power that the leadership changed its earlier position on the issue.

For the working people of Sri Lanka too language was certainly not a crucial issue. But *swabasha* policies were supported because of the need for communicating officially and otherwise in their own language, whether it be Sinhala or Tamil, and on some expectations that recognition of the mother tongue would mean better educational and job opportunities for their children. But the agitation exclusively for 'Sinhala Only' was neither the main preoccupation nor a particular demand of the Sinhala working-class and peasantry, who had no reason to exclude the recognition of Tamil. In fact in August 1953, the working-class led a militant hartal on an economic issue, protesting the cut in the rice subsidy, an event which united the entire non-plantation workers of all ethnic groups and which also spread to the rural areas.

To the urban and rural petty bourgeoisie, however language was an issue that aroused strong emotions and had profound significance. This class included the rural and urban small proprietors and traders and those who were key opinion-makers among the Sinhalese intelligentsia-monks, writers, novelists, poets, journalists-as well as other articulate section - school teachers, students and minor employees in the government and private sectors. In a society dominated by the Christianised English educated, it was these sections who felt economically socially and politically deprived and excluded from the various material privileges of society.

During the 1950s, the two connected issues of employment and education became very strongly interlinked, to emerge at basically an anti-Tamil demand up to that period the members of the Sinhala and Tamil bourgeoisie had amicably studied together in the universities and were colleagues in the higher professions; at lower levels they had worked along side each other in the public services. This worked without too much antagonism as long as the system had enough space for both communities in the educational institutions and in employment. The increase in unemployment in the early 1950s however, along with the rapid expansion of secondary education in Sinhala and Tamil put a further strain on the employment situation and eventually on the higher education system. These factors aggravated the tensions that were building up *and language itself thus came to be seen as an economic issue.*

Teachers

Four main sections of the petty bourgeoisie were particularly active on the language agitation. First the Sinhala teachers, who in 1956, numbered 35,000, felt great resentment not only because they were paid half the salary of English-trained teachers but also because they had low status in a situation where knowledge of English was linked to higher positions in the social hierarchy.

In addition, facilities and conditions in English schools were far superior to those in Sinhala schools and this distinction which affected the performance of students, further aggravated the hostility against the English-based education system which was mainly run by Christians of various denominations. Howard Wriggins, who interviewed many Sinhala teachers during these years summarised their views :

Most of these disadvantages would disappear, it was argued, if Sinhalese were made the sole official language. All the status that previously adhered to English when it was the 'official language' would become associated with the Sinhalese language and thence to Sinhalese teachers. They were, after all, the experts in Sinhalese culture and language, and if their proficiency received state recognition, naturally

they themselves would rise in status. If Sinhalese was made the state language, differential pay, educational facilities, and job opportunities would no longer favour the English-speaking elite. And as it was seen from the village, vast numbers of government jobs would immediately be opened to their students if English were displaced and Sinhalese promoted. (Wriggins 1960 : 338-9)

Students and Youth

The students in Sinhala schools and the unemployed youth educated in Sinhala, were also at the fore-front of 'Sinhala Only' agitation. The expansion of *swabasha* education in the 1940s had resulted in increasing numbers studying in Sinhala and Tamil. By the 1950s, the problem of unemployed educated youth had become a political issue. The Sinhala students were particularly vociferous on the language issue in the hope that a 'Sinhala Only' policy would lead to greater employment opportunities. This point was emphasised by Pieter Keuneman of the CP who in parliament, exposed the economic illusions created by the 'Sinhala Only' Act, which had given false hopes of employment to Sinhala youth.

We had one argument from the representative of the local Klu Klux Klan.....he made a statement that this is a bill to solve the employment problems of the Sinhalese....Why do you think all these SSC students and others are stirred to such an extent ?....many of them believe that immediately this bill is passed they will all get jobs, that economic problems will be solved, (Hansard, 14 Jun 1956)

Ayurvedic Physicians

Another active pressure group was that of the *ayurvedic* physicians who numbered between seven to ten thousand: they had occupied an important position in traditional society, but had been relegated to a marginal position by the government's medical services based on 'Western' medicine. This group was particularly active on the language issue, believing that raising

Sinhala to the position of the official language would automatically be associated with a restoration of traditional Sinhala culture, within which the *ayurvedic* system of medicine would receive its due place. Since the ayurvedic physicians commanded respect in the rural areas and also had an important hold on the people in their capacity as healers, the involvement of this group in language agitation served to bring the issue to the rural masses.

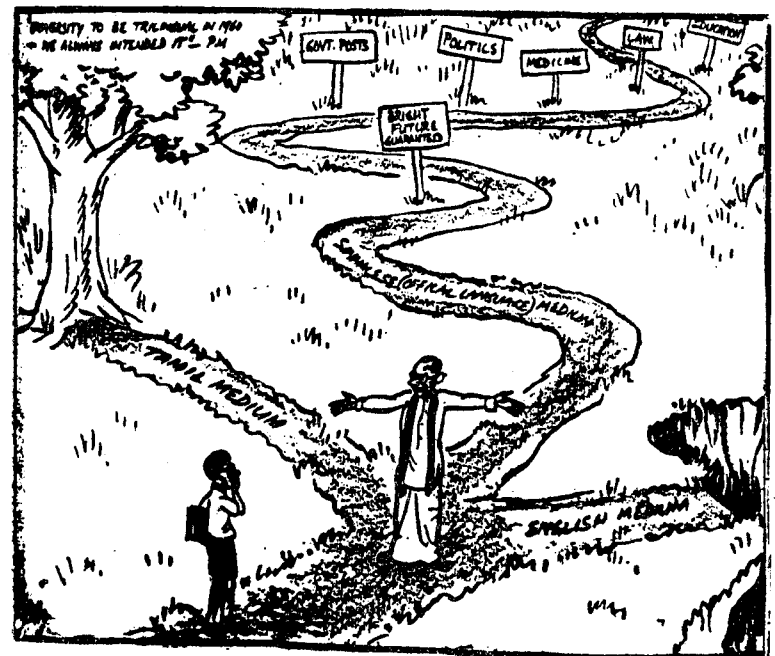
The Monks (Bhikkus)

The most militant and articulate spokesmen of the petty bourgeoisie on the language issue were the Buddhist monks, who in the early 1950's had begun to prepare for Buddha Jayanthi by organising themselves into associations and then into federations of *bhikkus* organisations. Two of the large federations joined to form the Eksath Bhikku Peramuna (EBP), designed to mobilise the monks to defeat the UNP at the elections. The main issue included those raised in the Buddhist Commission Report: namely the restoration of Buddhism through state recognition and patronage, educational reforms and privileges for Buddhist properties, as well as the promotion of Buddhist values, the censorship of obscene books and films and the banning of horse-racing and the consumption of alcohol.

In addition, the monks organised agitation on the language issue and were the main speakers in the 'Sinhala Only' campaign. The monks felt keenly on this question; they were educated in the Sinhala language and its classics as well as in Pali, and were accepted by the Buddhists as the protectors of Sinhala culture. But they had neither recognition nor influence in areas dominated by the English-speaking elite, namely the administration, higher education and politics.

The resentment of all these sections of the Sinhala petty bourgeoisie against the English-educated was particularly strong, and their campaign was focussed against the UNP as the party in power; charges were flung against the leaders that they were Westernised and Christian in culture, much

being made of allegations of degenerate habits among the ruling classes such as drinking, gambling and beef-eating. Such themes of 'immorality in high places' (reminiscent of Dharmapala's fulminations of an earlier epoch) always evoked immediate responses by playing on the resentment and envy of those groups in society who delighted in exposing 'vices' in the rich, which they defined as un-Sinhala and un-Buddhist. The Sinhala people, once again fell prey to false consciousness; the capitalists were attacked for their language, religion, life style and 'wicked' habits, rather than for their exploitation of the working people; minorities were seen as the enemy and the way set, once again, for the Sinhala petty bourgeoisie to forget its radicalism and to go rushing down the slippery path of chauvinism under the banner of 'Sinhala Only'-dragging the country into the mire of ethnic violence.



Take your pick !

The cartoonist depicts the real alternatives facing future students at the university-to learn in English will lead to a void, to learn in Tamil will lead up a tree. Only Sinhalese, will lead to opportunities in the desired profession. (Wriggins 1960 : 263)

Sinhala Chauvinism in The 1950's

By the time of the election in 1956, both the UNP and the SLFP, as well as Philip Gunawardena's VLSSP (Viplavakari Sama Samaja Party) had opted for the declaration of Sinhala as the only official language. The LSSP and CP however continued to hold out for parity of Sinhala and Tamil and many of the meetings they organised in support of this policy were broken up by Sinhala Chauvinists. At the elections in April 1956, the coalition led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, the Majahana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) won 51 seats out of 95, (obtaining an absolute majority) the Left winning 17 seats and the UNP being reduced to 8 seats. Since the election campaign had been based mainly on the language issue, the first legislation of the new government was the bill to make Sinhala the sole official language.

In presenting the bill, Bandaranaike outlined the injustices that had arisen because of the continued use of English, and explained the basis for the change from parity to 'Sinhala Only'; referring to Sir John Kotelawala's speech in Jaffna calling for parity, he described the reaction :

Then everything exploded. People in the South saw this thing staring them in the face-parity of official language - and felt that it would be gravely detrimental to the continuance and progress of the Sinhala language; that it would almost imply the extinction of the Sinhalese language. (Hansard 6 June 1956)

However Bandaranaike, who had earlier advocated parity, also made some interesting reservations; describing the 'Sinhala Only' agitation he said 'The vast majority of the Sinhalese felt that way very strongly. That at least is a fact. Whether you consider them to have been absolutely justified is another question'. (ibid)

The support that Philip Gunawardena of the VLSSP gave to the bill attracted attention, for he was the first Left leader to abandon a progressive position on the ethnic issue. One LSSP member taunted him by quoting from an earlier speech in 1948,

on the occasion of the Citizenship Bill when Gunawardena said 'The LSSP and other revolutionary parties will fight this communalism and will not in any circumstances succumb to racialism. We have....fought to obtain for every person who lives in this island....the same rights.' (Quoted by Anil Moonesinghe (Hansard 11 June 1956). By 1956, Philip Gunawardena's views had changed and he argued that the 'Sinhala Only' Bill was necessary to redress historic grievances.

We are completing, by this Bill an important phase in our national struggle. The restoration of the Sinhalese language to the position it occupied before the occupation of this country by foreign powers, marks an important stage in history of the development of this island".

Left Opposition

The main Left parties in Sri Lanka came out in favour of parity, despite certain currents of opinion within their parties which preferred to move with the 'Sinhala tide'. In 1955, in the midst of agitation for 'Sinhala Only' and three days after an LSSP rally at the Colombo Town Hall had been broken up by Sinhala extremists, Dr. Perera proposed in Parliament that Sinhala and Tamil be made state languages on a basis of parity. He referred to the mounting chauvinism in the country.

It would have been easy for me and the members of my party to have sponsored the very popular idea. Sinhalese Only and we would have been acclaimed as heroes as a good many others have been. But our party has taken up a consistent position. Ever since our party was launched we have never faltered or wavered from that position because we felt that was the correct line to take. That position we still adhere to. However unpopular that line of action might be, I am convinced myself of the correctness of that attitude. It might mean going into the political wilderness for some time, but still we the members of the LSSP are prepared to face that. Let there be no mistake about this. (Hansard 19, Oct. 1955).

The Sinhala Only Bill of 1956 was bitterly contested, by both the Tamil Congress and the Left members of parliament. The Marxists attempted to find reasons for the degeneration to racism that had occurred. A brief consideration of their views are revealing, especially in view of their own changes of policy only a few years later.

Forewarnings of Separatism

In the debate in parliament, Leslie Goonewardena attributed the lack of concern for minority opinion to the absence of a developed national consciousness in Sri Lanka :

One of the reasons why the state language question has become so acute and apparently....incapable of solution is because of the low level of consciousness of a Ceylonese nationality that exists among the people....we did not have mass struggles against imperialism in order to win independence....If the Sinhalese as well as the Tamils had gone to jail in their thousands, a consciousness, not of Sinhalese and Tamil nationality but of a Ceylonese nationality would have been built up in that struggle.

With great foresight he also warned that the consequences of forcing the Sinhala language on an unwilling minority, would be ethnic rioting and separatism :

There is the graver danger....if those people....feel that a grave and irreparable injustice is done to them, there is a possibility of their deciding even to break away from the rest of the country. (Hansard 8 June 1956).

Similarly Colvin R. de Silva argued forcefully that while the acceptance of parity of language was the road to 'freedom of our nation and the unity of its components', 'Sinhala Only' would lead to unforeseen consequences :

Two torn little bleeding states may yet arise out of one little state....ready for the imperialists to mop up that which imperialism has only recently disgorged. (Hansard, 14 June 1956)

Several Left speakers in the debate referred to the government's cynical use of the language issue for gaining political power. Anil Moonesinghe contrasted the 1947 and 1952 elections, which had no slogans to 'save the Sinhala language', with that of 1956 in which it had become the main slogan. 'How can one account for this except by the fact that certain people made this an election issue because they wanted to come to power' he stated further criticising the MEP concept of Socialism :

For them Socialism is confined to one section of the people, to one community, I have never witnessed this type of Socialism, except the Socialisms of Pilsudski, Hitler and Mussolini. (Hansard 11 June 1956)

In the voting in June 1956, there were 66 votes for the Bill (MEP, UNP and VLSSP) with 29 votes against. As expected, the Left parties, all the Tamil members of parliament and 3 Muslims voted against the bill; but ironically, support for 'Sinhala Only' came from several minority M.P.S - namely C.A.S. Marikkar (who was a Minister), Dr. M.P. Drahman, Sir Razik Fareed, (both Muslim) Rosslyn Koch and R.S.V. Poulter (appointed Burgher members) and J.R. Murray, R.P. Gaddum and R. Singleton-Salmon, (appointed to represent European interest)

Significantly, the two major parties of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, along with a breakaway for a working-class party had opted for a policy that went against minority interest, in the name of redressing historic grievances and catering to the needs of the Sinhala masses. An in earlier instance, once again a democratic demand had been transformed into an anti-democratic assault on minority rights, and Sinhala leaders were able to delude the Sinhala public that a progressive step forward had been achieved. Instead, what happened was a quick descent into ethnic violence, which erupted even as the Bill was being discussed.

Ethnic Violence And Conflict 1956-1958

The agitation on the language issue led in 1956, to the first outbreak of serious ethnic violence in forty years. It began when

the Federal Party members who had started a *satyagraha* on June 5th, (when the 'Sinhala Only' bill was introduced), were assaulted by a crowd; there were further violent incidents against Tamils in Colombo and in the colonisation schemes of the Gal Oya Valley (in the Eastern province). During this phase of violence, over 150 people were estimated to have been killed.

The Sinhala-Tamil problem was thereafter to escalate and dominate the politics of the country in this period, the Federal Party organised active resistance to the government's language policy, and announced a further *satyagraha* campaign timed for August 1957. The Prime Minister tried to avert this by coming to an agreement with the leader of the Federal Party. Under the Bandaranaike - Chelvanayagam Pact, *satyagraha* was abandoned; Tamil was to be recognised as the language of a national minority and the language of administration in the Northern and Eastern local provinces where regional councils with limited powers over administration including education would be established; these councils would also be empowered to select allottees for land settlement schemes according to agreed criteria.

Sections of the Sinhalese, including militant *bhikkus*, declared the pact to be a betrayal of Sinhala interests and the UNP organised a march to Kandy to protest against the bill. The situation was further aggravated by a counter campaign in Jaffna in March 1958, to tar out the Sinhala letter 'sri' on vehicle license plates, which led to retaliation by Sinhala crowds who began to tar Tamil sign posts in Colombo. In addition, there was continuous pressure on Bandaranaike by the *bhikkus* who surrounded his house, demanding the abrogation of the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam pact; he finally had to accede to these pressures and go back on the pact.

This was the background to the rioting that broke out in many parts of the country on May 23rd 1958; it was especially severe in Colombo, Batticaloa, Polonnaruwa, Badulla, Kurunegale, Panadura, Galle and Matara. Shops were looted and set on fire. Tamils were attacked and killed, trains were derailed

and unparalleled violence took place for four days before a state of emergency was declared. The riots resulted in 12,000 Tamils having to flee their houses and take shelter in refugee camps before being transported to Jaffna. The mood in Colombo during the riots can be gauged from the government agent's reports which described the situation on the 26th and 27th May;

Passing vehicles were stopped and their occupants mercilessly assaulted. Moving trains were halted at several places and the passengers ruthlessly attacked. There were many instances of arson and such brutal scenes as men being burnt alive. Looting was rampant. The Police were helpless against these marauding rioters. (Quoted in Kearney. p.87).

One particular feature of the 1958 outburst was the violence in areas of the North Central and Eastern provinces in which there were Sinhala colonists settled from other areas and hired wages labours, working on the opening up of jungle areas.

* * * *

The success of the 'Sinhala Only' campaign and the riots of 1958 once again revealed the persistence and strength of the concepts that have been identified as forming Sinhala Buddhist consciousness. The concepts of the primacy of the Sinhala people and their mission to protect Buddhism were brought into full play during this period and were strong enough to incite some Sinhala people to go on the rampage against Sri Lanka Tamils. In class terms, the particular economic interests that were being served were those of the Sinhala petty-bourgeoisie, consisting of the Sinhala intelligentsia, students, clerks, teachers, monks, small traders and shopkeepers. To this group, the language issue had been one critical importance, affecting their daily lives and giving them the illusory hope that 'Sinhala only' would mean more employment prospects and chances of getting into the prestigious posts held by the English-speaking elite. However, Sinhala Buddhist consciousness was strong enough to draw in the supports of other sections of the Sinhala masses like the urban poor, landless peasants, colonists and lumpen elements, for

what was conceived as a common struggle of the Sinhalese against the Tamils : in addition, the chauvinism of the period also forced the bourgeois political leadership to support the demand for 'Sinhala Only' in order to succeed electorally.

The violence of 1958 caused serious re-thinking in government circles and after the riots were over, a Tamil language Act providing for the 'reasonable use' of Tamil in the North and Eastern provinces was passed, but this was done in the absence of the Federal Party M.P.s who were in detention.



"The fight against the forces of evil 2,500 years ago and now. In this year of Buddha Jayanti, rescue your country, your race and your religion from the forces of evil"-a skillful combination of traditional lore and contemporary politics. Wriggins 1960 : 357

8. FROM MARXISM TO CHAUVINISM

One of the most crucial development of the 1960s was the spread of chauvinist ideology among the working people, led and encouraged by the two main Marxist Parties of Sri Lanka. There are several reasons for considering this phenomenon in some detail. It can be argued that one of the most important contributions to the political life of Sri Lanka by the Left parties was their insistence - over a period of 25 years - on the equality of all citizens in the country's multi-ethnic society. In the face of unpopularity, the Left, up to the mid-sixties, took an uncompromising stand in support of minority rights.

The Left parties also attempted to develop a rational secular consciousness, over-riding such traditional and parochial identities as religion, caste and ethnicity. They emphasised the backwardness of such identities and while taking no overt stand against religion, attempted to minimise its influence. They demonstrated their beliefs by stressing, in their political and trade union organisations, the importance of class unity; working within a class divided into several ethnic and religious and caste groups, they yet sought to emphasise class unity over all other considerations.

This strong insistence on class as opposed to ethnic consciousness was certainly a factor in keeping the larger part of the organised working-class away from pogroms against the minorities. However once the Left had legitimised appeals to ethnic consciousness and began speaking as members of an ethnic groups, there was no important force to check the spread of Sinhala chauvinism among the working people. Thus the reversal of policies of the main Left parties, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the communist Party (CP) in the early sixties, meant that for the first time, the working-class had no *major political party* to provide an alternative non-chauvinist leadership.

In the 1920's, the trade union movement led by A.E. Goonesinha, took non-racist stand, even to the extent of suppor-

ting franchise rights for Indian plantation workers. When Goonésinha switched to chauvinism in the 1930s, his own slogan-that the working-class knew no barriers of caste, colour race or creed-was taken up by the Left, and the LSSP firmly supported the rights of minorities. Up to the early 1960's, both the LSSP and CP took up non-chauvinist positions on all issues and made this a central concern of their politics. But by the mid-sixties, the tide had turned and racism not only gripped important sections of the masses, but also found its way into the main Left parties.

This reversal of Left policies on the ethnic issue was to have serious consequences. Whereas joining coalition governments could be defended as part of short-term strategies which could, on later analyses even be identified as 'mistakes' the resort to chauvinism by the Left was a betrayal of basic socialist principles

The spread of chauvinism among the masses made the ethnic issue a useful weapon to prevent the class issue flaring up. The lines that are drawn today are based on ethnicity and not class, and the polarisation on ethnic lines between Sinhala and Tamil and the continuance of a war in the North is a determining factor in keeping down and diverting the class tensions that are simmering in the South. The Sinhala workers of Sri Lanka, rather than being aroused to unite irrespective of ethnicity with workers of minority groups to bring about social change, are being urged to unite with other Sinhalese irrespective of class, to establish complete Sinhala Buddhist hegemony in the country.

The abandonment of the struggle for a secular class consciousness by the Left parties, opened the way for the infusion of racist ideology into the masses of the country and to a situation where ethnic consciousness seems today to be the dominant constituent of their ideology.

The Hartal of 1953

The political and economic upheavels of the 1950s were very crucial factors in the change from a principled non-racist position to an opportunist support of communal policies. The

Sinhala Buddhist sentiments that emerged in the 1950s were both chauvinist (directed against Tamils and Christians) and egalitarian (directed to the political elite and privileged groups). The assertion of such feelings was not unconnected to the prevailing critical economic situation of the 1950s. The issue of class consciousness as against ethnic consciousness was clearly posed in two contrasting 'mass' events of the 1950s - the hartal of 1953 and the ethnic riots of 1958, both events being manifestations of a crisis-ridden decade.

After the collapse of the Korean boom of the early 1950s, for three decades Sri Lanka experienced serious economic problem linked with worsening terms of trade and rising unemployment. The effects of the crisis were being already felt by 1952 when there was a collapse of rubber prices and a serious fall in foreign exchange earnings. This coincided with a shortage of rice and a dramatic rise in its price in 1953. During the late 1950s, the price and volume of imported goods rose, whereas the price of exports declined; domestic production was also severely effected by droughts and floods especially in 1956-57; the situation was further aggravated by mounting unemployment.

The *hartal* or general stoppage of work which occurred in 1953 was one of the most important mass actions of the working people in Sri Lanka. In the post world War years, there had been a great increase in militant action by the working-class, including the massive general strikes of 1945, 1946 and 1947, led by the Left parties. Workers of all ethnic groups joined in these struggles and the death of a Tamil clerk, Kandasamy, in the police firing in 1947 against the strikers, was annually commemorated by the trade unions in later years.

Although the 1947 strike was smashed by the government, the militancy of the workers was only temporarily subdued, and erupted again in 1953, when the government drastically cut the rice subsidy which led to a very sharp increase in its price. On 26th July 1953, a mass protest rally was held on Galle Face green which the police tear-gassed. The 24 hour *hartal* on August 12th met with an immediate and unexpected response. The urban working people of all ethnic groups joined the

protest by leaving their work places; in many Parts of the country, there was an impressive and militant response from the rural masses (especially in the South) who stopped all transport, barricaded roads, paralysed the railways and resisted the forces of law and order, resulting in 11 deaths and wide-spread arrests. As the LSSP *young Socialist* wrote :

Although the hartal was limited to a 24 hour period, its effects were far-reaching on the consciousness of the people and the political temper in the country....it led to the eventual resignation....of the Prime Minister....In the political life of the People it produced a qualitative change and built up in them the confidence that their united strength could determine....the fate of governments....The repercussions of the Hartal were evident three years later at the polls when the UNP was unceremoniously, dethroned. (*Young Socialists* No. 2 1961).

This was the view from the Left - namely that the MEP victory of 1956 was linked to the upsurge of mass action. The same analysis of the lessons of the hartal was that :

Capitalism cannot assure the well-being of the masses; only a bold socialist policy will secure the economic co-operation of the masses and lift the country out of its economic stagnation. History can yet repeat itself and the fund of mass patience is not inexhaustible (ibid).

This optimistic analysis failed to foresee the impending change of line of the Left and the emergence of ethnic rather than class consciousness in the 1960s. In 1958, the country was plunged into ethnic violence, in which sections of the masses also participated, and history was indeed to repeat itself, not in class actions but in ethnic carnage in 1977, 1981 and 1983.

Much has been spoken about the 'betrayal' of the Left parties in joining coalitions with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party in 1964-65 and again in 1970-75. But the real betrayal

was not so much in their short period of participation in coalition governments, *but in their succumbing to racism and dividing the working people along ethnic as opposed to class lines*. In doing this the Left went against the basic non-racist principles it has consistently and forcefully advocated for twenty five years. One of the most eloquent of the LSSP leaders, Colvin R. de Silva had denounced racism in 1958, as 'Neanderthalian recidivism.'

I am confident in my knowledge....that large numbers of people, who in 1955 were not ready even to contemplate giving Tamil any place at all, today say in this desperate way ; 'Well, if the only way we can go forward is by making Tamil also an official language let us do it. If that is the only way out of this.' My hon. friends say, 'If you do it, you will have a Sinhalese communalist uprising....But I say that if we place faith in....those large masses of the country who are sick and tired to death of these communal conflicts, if we would rely on them and have the courage of our convictions to act along the lines of relying on them, this can be achieved. (Failure of Communalist Politics by Colvin R. de Silva quoted in Wanasinghe, 1966, (Emphasis added)

Instead of giving this leadership to the masses, however, the Left was caught up in strategies designed to obtain electoral success and ensure some sharing of power. From the working-class point of view, there had been two historic events in 1963 the formulation of 21 demands of the working-class by the joint Committee of Trade Union Organizations, representing a wide section of urban and plantation trade unions, and the coming together, for the first time, of the Left parties (LSSP, CP, and VLSSP) in a United Left Front in August 1963, which aroused the enthusiasm of the radical forces in the country. But in June 1964, both platforms crumbled when the LSSP accepted 3 portfolios in the Bandaranaike government. At the election of 1965, the coalition was defeated and the UNP formed a government with support from the Federal Party, which had returned 14 M.P.s from the Northern Eastern provinces. The

joining of forces between the UNP and Tamil politicians of the FP, and the support for the government from the two appointed members of Ceylon Workers Congress, unleashed a wave of communalism in the country; this backlash was encouraged, as a matter of political opposition to the UNP, not only by parties like the SLFP, but also by the LSSP and the CP. Now the view from the Left was as follows :

On one side was the united front of the LSSP and CP. Only the Sinhala Buddhist supported them. Who supported the UNP? Local and foreign capitalists, Indians led by Thondaman, Tamils led by Ponnambalam, the Catholic Church, Muslims who were against the trade policy of the coalition government, *thuppahi* elements who do not support our national culture, capitalist newspapers, all of them backed the UNP. The UNP was able to get a majority of seats because in addition they received the support of Sinhala Buddhists who do not have a clear understanding of Buddhist Philosophy. *Thus the Coalition received the unsullied votes of the people of this country.* The UNP received the votes of the minorities and a small section of the majority community, (Editorial, *janasathiya*, 28 March 1965, quoted in Wanasinghe op. cit, Emphasis added)

Thus did the Sinhala Chauvinism of the Left hit out against all minorities-in short against all un-Buddhists, un-Sinhala elements of the population. Significantly, by this date, the Left had also begun to use the word *thuppahi*, a derogatory term meaning half-caste without cultural roots-not dissimilar to Anagarika Dharmapalas' 'infidels of degraded race.' in an article 'Nation grieves at Sinhala New Year., the *anamathaya* (of 9 April 1965) wrote :

—How can we celebrate Sinhalese New Year at a time when the nation has been betrayed by an alliance of the UNP, the Catholic Church, Singleton Salmon, Thondaman, and the Federalist?

The Sinhalese nation will weep during this Sinhalese New Year. The people who love the nation, the motherland and language will lament. (Wanasinghe, op.cit p, 122)

Ethnic hostility in the 1960s thus spread to many sections of the Sinhala population including the working-class; it was directed mainly against Sri Lankan Tamils, Christians and Indian Tamils. In all these instances, chauvinists in the Left were responsible for promoting ethnic antagonism among the working peoples, even though important sections of the workers were Tamils and the Sinhala working-class included Christians.

Against Christians

In the 1960s, the Christians once again became the targets of attack. There had been a Buddhist 'revival directed against the privileges of the Christian elite in the 1950s. In the spirit of Anagarika Dharmapala, the profession of Christianity was associated with immorality, drunkenness and alien 'vices' and the banned scurrilous pamphlet of the early 20th century, *Kanni Mariyage Hati* (The Truth about the virgin Mary) was republished in the 1950s. In the election campaign of 1956, the MEP had skilfully drawn on these prejudices; the sensational political poster of the period showing the Buddha being challenged by the evil hordes of Mara (John Kotelawala with belly-dancers, drunks, cow-slaughterers, ballroom dancers, urban socialist, and, significantly, Americans doling out dollar, in his bandwagon, with a church in the back-ground.) The Left was also involved in this campaign against Christians, whose image as 'enemies' was further reinforced by the resistance of sections of Christians to the take-over of their schools by the government in 1960. Instead of limiting their criticism to the conservative elements of the Christian clerical hierarchy, who opposed radical changes, Christians as a whole were denounced and vilified as 'anti-national' by the Left.

In the mid-sixties, Left newspapers frequently indulged in anti-Christian attacks. The LSSP paper *janasathiya* in 1965 had

headings such as 'Catholics help illicit immigrants to escape Army net' (July 18); and 'Buddhist G. A. transferred and a Catholic appointed' (20 Oct). Stories that Christians were unfairly taking high office were also publicised in *janasathiya*, 'Catholic influence has begun to spread...In addition to appointing two Catholic and one Protestant to three of the highest posts in Parliament, they have appointed Catholics for the post of Mayor and deputy Mayor in Colombo (11 April). The CP was no less virulent; its paper, the *Aththa* of 9 April 1965, under the editorial caption 'No place for Buddhists', also commented on the fact that the Speaker, and Chairman of Committees of the Parliament were Christians. (Quotations from Wanasinghe, 1965 : 120-123)

Against plantation workers

Left Parties also supported the Sirima-Shastri pact of 1964 between the Sri Lanka and Indian governments under which Sri Lankan Citizenship was to be given to 300,000 persons of Indian origin with 650,000 to be repatriated ostensibly on a voluntary basis. This was clearly a shift of position from the Left's earlier uncompromising policies towards plantation labour. When the UNP government of 1965 received the support of the Ceylon Workers Congress, and its leaders Thondaman and Annamalai were made Appointed Members of Parliament, the Left attacks on plantation workers and their leaders took a chauvinist turn.

The *Aththa*, reflecting CP opinion, was at the forefront of this campaign, making allegations that the government was giving concessions to the minorities and that the repatriation of plantation workers under the Sirima-Shastri Pact was threatened. Some of the *Aththa* headings left no doubt about their line. Referring to Sirima Bandaranaike's electoral defeat and Indian workers' repatriation, the paper attributed the phrase 'Before Meenachchi could be sent Sirimavo was chased out' to Thondaman the C. W. C. leader (30 Mar 1965, and Thondaman leaves for India like a Chola King who has conquered Lanka' was another story in the same issue,

The LSSP *Janadina* also tried to arouse hostility towards plantation workers, even taking a stand against voluntary repatriation, thereby implying that the Sirima-Shastri agreement had an element of forced repatriation of these workers to India. It wrote,

Another secret pact concessions to Thondaman

Political observers believe that Mr. Dudley Senanayake has entered into an agreement with Mr. Thondaman as well. One of the main conditions of that agreement is that only those who volunteer will be repatriated. (29 Nov. 1966 quoted in Wanasinghe 1966:219)

Against Sri Lankan Tamils

The main thrust of the Left propaganda of the period was however, directed against the demands of the Federal Party and its leaders. The campaign was conducted on a basis of virulent Sinhala Chauvinism and all the prejudices of the Majority community were revived.

The LSSP *Janadina* led the racist onslaught. Some of its headings in 1965 included 'A secret attempt to make Ratmalana a Tamil Town' (6 July; 'Sinhala Buddhists Arise' (9 July); 'Federalists win: English Rules; Sinhala finished' (23 July); 'Sinhala in the North in danger' (25 August) (Wanasinghe 1966: 213-17). On the question of the attempts to frame regulations on the use of Tamil in the North and East to ease the ethnic problem (the Dudley-Chelvanayagam Pact), the *Janadina* wrote, under the heading 'Tear the Pact';

Patriotic organisations are making rapid preparations to hold a series of meetings throughout the country to mobilise public protest against the Dudley-Chelvanayagam pact which betrays the birthright of the Sinhalese. (23 Nov. 1965 quoted in Wanasinghe 1966: 218)

It would have been difficult, during this period to distinguish the LSSP and CP Sinhala journals from the typical communal writing of the Sinhala Buddhist press. To give only one example, on 5 December 1965 the *Janadina* wrote :

The Tri Sinhala awakens three processions to save the country

The pancha Maha Bala Vegaya is now making preparations to have processions to the holy places in the Tri Sinhala starting from the statue of Vihara Mahadevi at Victoria park. This step is to show public protest to the Dudley-Chelvanayagam pact which betrays the birthright of the Sinhalese to the Tamils. (ibid)

Racist slogans to weaken and discredit the government were even introduced by the Left into the processions and speeches on May Day 1965 - the main cry being 'Dudleyge badai masalavadai' (Dudley has swallowed masalavadai) - a racist reference to the support given by the Federal party to the government. Apart from this sullyng of the historic workers day by Sinhala chauvinist slogans, the Left was also involved in the National Day of Mourning on January 8th 1966 which had been planned to include a general strike and a display of black flags, as well as an oath to defend the rights of the Sinhalese to be taken by M.Ps before Vihara Maha Devi's statue. There was not a great response to the call for a strike and black flags, but a crowd which marched to parliament crying 'Para Demalu apata epa' (Down with the outcaste Tamils), after the oath-taking ceremony, was stopped at Kollupitiya, where police firing killed a Buddhist monk. Emergency was declared by the government which used the occasion to victimise the workers. (Wanasinghe, 1966: 223-24).

Thus the Left, whose main contribution to the political life of the country had been to promote a democratic and socialist ideology that was essentially non-racist and based on class unity and class action, was to lead the working class, not only into coalition governments, but more dangerously into racist politics. The long years of struggle in building up class consciousness among a multi-ethnic working class were forgotten and instead, the poisoning influence of racism was injected into the system, resulting in sections of the working-class participating in subsequent programs that occurred in the country.

9. THE JVP AND THE ETHNIC QUESTION

By around 1965, the main Left parties had succumbed to racist politics and by the 1970s, and early 1980's the hegemony of Sinhala chauvinism was such that it included virtually all classes in society. Once the policies of working-class parties had become chauvinist and such sentiments were being propagated and diffused through the Left newspapers read by the masses, it was difficult to counteract chauvinism which then permeated Sinhala working people-both urban and rural. It is interesting to note that even the largest of the alternative groups, the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), which was formed in 1965-66 and led the 1971 uprising of youth in an attempt to capture political power, also basically appealed to Sinhala sentiments.

The JVP was composed of several splinter groups mainly from the 'Peking wing' Communist Party, which came together to form a revolutionary party, opposed to the 'revisionism' and 'betrayal' of the Old Left, which in 1964, had joined the SLFP government of Sirima Bandaranaike. The new party was essentially a Sinhala party, being confined to the Sinhala-speaking areas, with only a handful of supporters among Tamils. It was composed mainly of youth of the rural petty bourgeoisie and poor peasantry. Most of the JVP activists were products of the Sinhala language education stream, with secondary education qualifications, but little prospect of suitable employment. One can broadly agree with G. B. Keerawella's definition of the JVP and the uprising of 1971, as the 'Leftist challenge of the younger radical elements of the crisis-ridden petty bourgeoisie' (Keerawella 1980 : 48).

Economic Crisis And Political Unrest

Sri Lanka continued to face an economic crisis in the late 1960s. Terms of trade kept on deteriorating and the decline of foreign exchange earnings led to important controls, resulting in increased prices and shortages of essential goods. Investment

slowed down and unemployment (and under-employment) reached record heights. As foreign aid was insufficient to bridge the trade deficit during these years, the government resorted to heavy borrowing from abroad. The crisis led to a reduction in subsidies and welfare services and in November 1968, under IMF pressure, the rice subsidy was reduced and the rupee devalued prices.

The resulting sharp rise in prices affected the living standards of the working classes and the petty bourgeoisie. The late 1970s were thus a period of increasing labour unrest, and strikes occurred in the plantation and urban sectors and in both private and state-owned firms. In addition, these were years of continuous, militant student agitation in the universities and unrest among the youth of the country.

In the massive election landslide of July 1970 when the UNP was badly defeated sections of the JVP supported the victorious United Front of the SLFP and Left parties. But the JVP prepared for an armed insurrection, being disillusioned with the programmes of the new Government. State repression of the JVP also became severe. Finally insurrection broke out in April 1971. After some initial successes by the JVP, the state forces were able to reassert themselves and the insurrection was suppressed with a great deal of ferocity.

J V P Ideology

It is not surprising that, in spite of the revolutionary slogans of the JVP and their internationalism, as seen in their admiration for the Cuban revolution and the example of The Guevara, the JVP in its early years had a fairly strong element of Sinhala chauvinism. In 1971, of the 14 Politbureau members of the JVP, all were Sinhala Buddhists, mainly from the strongly nationalist and radical regions of the South of Sri Lanka; they were mostly products of Buddhist schools in Southern provincial towns. With an exception, they were in their twenties, and had grown up during the years of the 'Sinhala Only' agitation of the mid-1950s, the ethnic riots of 1958 and the mounting chauvinism against the minorities even of the Left parties, in the early 1960s.

The ideology of the JVP has been defined as not strictly Marxist-Leninist "but an eclectic mixture consisting of various elements of Stalinism, Maoism, Castroism, Guevarism etc.", (Keerawella 1980 : 46). This definition however omits one of the key elements of its ideology, namely Sinhala nationalism, which evoked a response in the petty bourgeoisie-the social base of the JVP.

Indian Expansionism

One of the important lessons of the JVP's programmes of indoctrination-the famous 'Five Lessons'-was the one of 'Indian Expansionism' an idea taken from the Maoists. According to this lesson, the thrust for Indian expansion in the region derived from the needs of Indian big capital which operated in Sri Lanka through several interrelated factors, namely trade, the smuggling of goods, the Federal Party, the "We Tamil" movement (Indian cultural expansionism, illicit immigration and Indian plantation labour. The background to this lecture was a historical narration of South Indian incursions into Sri Lanka from the 4th century B. C. the time of Sena, Guttika, Elara etc. Thus the modern threat to Sri Lanka from Indian expansionism was set in the context of Sinhala nationalism and was seen as a continuation of ancient threats to the Sinhala people from South Indians. The approach was totally a historical and sought to tap the prejudices of the JVP's petty bourgeoisie base.

The arguments under the various heads were as follows :

(1) Indian capital dominates and even monopolises some sectors of the export import trade. These capitalists have their bases in India and their exploitative activities in Sri Lanka are designed to contribute to the development of the Indian capitalist class.

(ii) These capitalists also engage in contraband Goods are smuggled between the two countries, to the detriment of Sri Lanka's finances.

(iii) The Federal Party is an extension of the "we Tamil" movement of South India, which aims at uniting all Tamils everywhere. They were thus virtually seen as a fifth column, as agents of a foreign power.

(iv) Cultural penetration through the use of films, magazines, music etc, is one of the facets of Indian expansionism. All Tamils in Sri Lanka look on M. G. R. as a heroic figure.

Plantation Labour

The crucial part of this lecture however, dealt with JVP attitudes towards plantation labour. It was alleged that plantation workers who had been brought to Sri Lanka by the British to serve imperialist interests live in the best parts of Sri Lanka and enjoyed benefits like housing, education and health facilities; their conditions and living standards were superior to those of Sinhala peasants engaged in slash and burn (chena) cultivation and their political loyalty as well as cultural and social links were still with their homelands in India.

With regard to plantations, the JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera, is reported to have said "The tea bush has killed and replaced the paddy plant, the rubber tree has killed and replaced the kurakkan plant". (*Janatha Sangamaya*, 1980 : 96). Therefore the plantation sector had to be destroyed in order to build up a self-sufficient economy in Sri Lanka. In response to questions about the possibility of drawing in plantation labour into the revolutionary movement, Wijeweera argued that no revolutionary movement could succeed if it was heavily based on the support of national minorities. He cited the example of the Iraqi Communist Party which had based itself on Kurdish support and had been wiped out by the Baath Party.

It was also alleged that estate Tamil still referred to Tamilnadu as "Thainadu" (mother-country) and revered Indian leaders like Gandhi and Nehru. The general argument was that their interests were not linked to Sri Lanka and that they could not be mobilised for the Sri Lanka revolution. It was also stressed that the problem of plantation labour could not be looked at in isolation; it was necessary to place it in the context of 'Indian expansionism'.

In discussing their role after the revolution, the JVP argued that if these workers became Sri Lankan citizens, and did not

oppose the closing down of the plantations, the party would welcome them. If not, they would have to be treated as counter-revolutionaries and fought, even though they were workers. It was argued by analogy that Stalin fought the German army, even though that army was composed, in the main, of members of the German proletariat. On the question of the JVP line towards the plantation workers, a commentator in the Lanka Guardian wrote;

This posture of the JVP was so absurd that the most exploited segment of the Sri Lankan proletariat was portrayed as an agent of the Indian monopoly bourgeoisie, while simultaneously counter-posing it to the other exploited sections of our society such as the chena cultivators. So much for the worker-peasant alliance (Lanka Guardian: 15 Jan 1979)

Chauvinist Attitudes

In the 'Five Lesson', the approach of the JVP to the minorities was based on the Sinhala Chauvinist view which regards Sindhi and Borath merchants, Tamil capitalists, Tamil workers and peasants and Indian Tamil estate labour - as one homogeneous group with an extra-territorial loyalty. No attempt was made to distinguish between Tamils on a class basis or even on the basis of 'Sri Lanka' and Indian Tamils. This was synonymous with the ideology of Sinhala chauvinism - which regards all non-Sinhala, of whatever class, as aliens out to exploit the 'sons of the soil'; and debase their culture. The fact that this attitude was central to JVP ideology is also demonstrated by their further acceptance of some of the myths of the Sinhalese; for example Sinhala-Tamil differences were referred to as having a historic genesis in 'Arya-Anarya' conflicts. The Harijans of the North were described as descendants of Sinhalese subsequently enslaved by the Tamils. In their recounting of the colonial period and of resistance to colonial powers, reference was made only to resistance from Sinhala people.

Further, the proposed solution for the ethnic problem revealed the JVP's strong commitment to Sinhala nationalism. The party advocated the reallocation of the country's population

so that Sinhalese and Tamils would be dispersed all over the island. It was claimed that this would eliminate the ethnic problem which largely derived from the occupation of geographical area by different ethnic groups. It is obvious that this 'final solution' was based on a theory of assimilation whereby the Tamil minority would be gradually absorbed into the Sinhala majority.

Thus, in the mid 1970's JVP ideology with regard to the ethnic question was consonant with mass Sinhala consciousness as we have defined it. One inevitable result of this ideology was that the JVP, although claiming to be a Left Party, did not either pose problems in class terms or seek the support of the minorities; It remained essentially a Sinhala party. This was reflected in the fact that the 1971 insurrection was confined to the Sinhala areas of the country.

Change of Policy

Following the defeat of the insurrection and the self-criticism during the subsequent period, the JVP changed its line on the ethnic question. The lecture on 'Indian expansionism' was dropped from the programme of instruction. The earlier adherence to a nationalist line was blamed on Stalinist and Maoist influences on their thinking. This self criticism was extended to the point of describing patriotism as a non-Marxist, chauvinist concept. A long self-critical essay published by the party referred to "The dark chapter in our history when revolutionary Marxist teachings were ignored, when class collaboration replaced class struggle, when narrow chauvinism and patriotism replaced internationalism". '*Let us look at April 1971 self-critically*' - Niyamuva publication in Sinhala p, 4, emphasis added).

The JVP at this stage, accepted that the Tamil people were a nation, that they were subject to oppression by the majority, that they were entitled to the right of self-determination even to the point of secession. However, the party did not advocate secession: it believed that the problems of the Tamil nation could only be solved within the framework of a socialist Sri Lanka. It had, in the Interim, no plan of action as regards

this question. There were thus serious theoretical and practical shortcomings to the position adopted by the JVP during this period. It resulted, however in some activity among both Sri Lankan and plantation Tamils and the involvement of some Tamils in JVP activities: Tamils also appeared in the lists of candidates put forward by the JVP for district council and municipal elections; for example, their candidate for the deputy mayoralty in Colombo, in the Municipal elections of 1981, was a Tamil.

This line was not fated to last, however, and in recent years, the party has again given into the rising tide of Sinhala chauvinism. This is apparent from many of the statements on this question made by the party since 1982. In its Presidential campaign in October 1982, the JVP maintained what was called a 'strategic silence' on the ethnic issue. This silence has since then been transformed into the adoption of attitudes in no way different from those of other Sinhala chauvinists. One needs only to refer to the statements issued in 1984, for the 13th anniversary of the April uprising, denouncing the Round Table Conference and rejecting all suggestions of solving the ethnic issue through devolution.

These attitudes are confirmed in another document issued in 1984 by Rohana Wijeweera entitled 'A Message to the people of Sri Lanka'. It is interesting that this document also takes over some of the emotional rhetoric of Sinhala extremism, expressing opposition to any devolution of power to the Tamil people:

We are also totally opposed to the secret attempts being made by the government, on the basis of the Round Table Conference and behind the backs of the people, to foist on the country a federal solution. Federalism, as has been shown in the case of India will only help to further separatist tendencies. We are for a unitary state where all will enjoy equal rights.

The political struggles of the TULF as well the activities of Tamil militant groups are now seen as an Imperialist plot. As the message melodramatically puts it : "The JVP and I (Rohana

Wijeweera) are totally opposed to any imperialist attempt to divide the country. As long as the JVP exists, as long as I live, we shall not allow any imperialist force to divide the country". The message concludes, "I have not fled from Sri Lanka. I shall not abandon the country and the nation (*Ratasaha Jathiyat*) when the nation is in peril.... we are prepared to make any sacrifice to preserve the country and the nation from the great danger it is now facing". (Since the Sinhala word 'Jathiya' also means race, the question arises as to whether Wijeweera by *Jathiya* meant the 'Sinhala race'.)

The inability of the older Left parties to maintain previous positions on the question of the minorities in the face of a rising Sinhala ethnic consciousness has been detailed in the last chapter. The JVP, which began as a corrective to their opportunism, is treading the same path. It has now adopted both the values and the rhetoric of Sinhala chauvinism. It even opposes any meaningful devolution of power, ironically, at a time when the 'Old Left' parties (LSSP & CP) are moving towards a more rational position. The important question however, is the persisting strength of ethnic consciousness and the power it has to override all other difference -including class. This is precisely the theoretical problem before the Left today.

10 THE HEGEMONY OF SINHALA BUDDHIST IDEOLOGY IN THE 1970'S

Earlier chapters have discussed the formation of Sinhala Buddhist ideology over a century - from the lone voices of Anagariga Dharmapala and others during the height of colonial rule, to the late 1970's, when this ideology became dominant among the Sinhala people. Its hegemonic nature was such that it covered all classes among the Sinhala Buddhists and all major political parties of the South. What is more, Sinhala Buddhist hegemony became legitimised through its incorporation into the two Constitutions of 1972 and 1978. Sri Lanka then became in constitutional terms the *Sinhaladvipa* and the *Dharmadvipa* - the land of a 'chosen' people - the Sinhala who had pledged to preserve and protect the 'chosen' faith-Buddhism.

All Class Hegemony

In the 1970s and early 1980s, there was a determined racist propaganda campaign designed to appeal to all sections of Sinhala Buddhists. While many issues were raised to arouse the Buddhists in general, certain specific 'grievances' were promoted in order to excite identifiable classes - the Sinhala bourgeoisie, working - class and peasantry. The propaganda was carried on in Sinhala and documents of various Sinhala organisations were circulated in the post or by hand, never actually reaching the bookshops or new-stands, but nevertheless reaching influential section of the Sinhala people. However, other chauvinist material was continuously published in the daily Sinhala newspapers; several leading Buddhist monks were also active in publishing agitational paper and journals and by the early 1980s, hardly any section of the Sinhala population remained unaffected by the agitation of the Sinhala Buddhist crusaders.

The Buddhist Crusade

In the campaign to whip up Buddhist feelings, the most high-profiled issue was that of archaeological remains of Budd-

hist shrines in the Northern and Eastern areas. Based [on the view] that only Sinhalese were Buddhists (thereby totally ignoring the earlier existence of Tamil Buddhists and the fact that many early Buddhist scholars and commentators were Tamils), the Sinhala Buddhists were even urged to wage a *dharma yudhaya* (holy war) for the preservation of these Buddhist sites.

It is no secret that the archaeological ruins of the Northern province, which was a part of the Raja Rata in the days of the Sinhala Kings, and of the Eastern Province, which was a part of the ancient state of Rohana, have faced the threat of destruction for quite some time now. If we any longer permit this destruction to go on, shutting our eyes to it or engaged selfishly in our own personal affairs, we will be supporting this anti-Sinhala, anti-Buddhist campaign which is directed towards erasing and destroying completely all traces of Sinhala Buddhist culture from these areas, (*Sinhaluni Budu Sasuna Bera ganiwi* opcit 1981 : 13)

This was an effort not only to rebut the claims of Sri Lankan Tamils to a 'traditional homeland,' but also to warn the Buddhists about the dire consequence of separatism.

If Sri Lanka is divided into two, into Sinhala and Tamil areas, many famous old Buddhist places of worship such as Seruwila, Deegavapi, Kiri Vehara and Naga Dipa as well as those shrines which are not covered by the jungle, would fall into the hands of the Tamils (*Sinhalayage Adisi Hatura*, opcit 1970 : 48)

Arousing The Peasantry

In the specific attempts made to arouse various classes and groups of Sinhalese, by raising issues that were likely to agitate them, the Sinhala peasantry of the Kandyan district was set up against plantation workers. Politically these workers had for many years been deprived of their rights, but after 1964 a section had received citizenship while others had been repatriated; but the old bogey that the plantation workers would

politically, economically, and culturally 'swamp' the Sinhalese was resurrected as a theme of racist literature.

.... By conferring citizenship rights on a large and rapidly growing community such as the Tamil-speaking Indian plantation workers, we see that Sinhala culture, Buddhism and the up-country villager will all vanish in the not so distant future. (ibid p. 5-7)

Arousing the trades

Similarly, much of the propaganda directed against traders and shopkeepers of minority groups, found a ready response among their Sinhala competitors both from the petty bourgeoisie, and from the higher levels of Sinhala entrepreneurs.

A fact that should be especially mentioned here is that the wholesale and retail trade (which was about 68 years ago in the hands of the Sinhalese in Colombo as well as in the Uva, Sabaragamuwa and Central regions) is now completely in the hands of Indian nationals. This has not happened spontaneously. It is a result of an organised move by Indian trade unions and other organisations to supply Indians with cash and other necessities to purchase Sinhalese - owned business enterprises and buildings. Because of this farseeing and organised plan of the Indians, the number of Sinhalese traders has been reduced by about 90% and they have been replaced by a similar number of Tamil traders. (ibid.)

Arousing The Youth

Another important section of opinion-makers who were prone to racism, and at whom much of the racist propaganda was directed, were students, youth and parents of prospective graduates. These sections of the population were made to understand that there was a 'diabolical conspiracy' of Tamils to deprive Sinhala youth of both higher education and prestigious employment. In a situation of intense competition, where very large numbers of students competed for a few thousand university places each year, and where the results of university

examinations determined future careers, the allegations of conspiracy by Tamil teachers to give Tamil students higher marks, became indeed a 'burning question...exploding within the hearts of our Sinhala students, parents and teachers' *'Diabolical Conspiracy'*, (1980 ? 23 emphasis added)

With the expansion of education concurrently with the aggravation of the economic situation and the contraction of the number of jobs available in proportion to the number of graduates, it is not surprising that the ethnic battle ground shifted to the arena of education and that both the petty bourgeoisie and section of the Sinhala bourgeoisie and professionals became involved in the issue. The chauvinist sentiments that are expressed today by Sinhala professionals are linked to the high level of competition for education and employment.

Thus apart from a minute number of radical and members of the intelligentsia, the whole Sinhala nation-workers, peasants, petty bourgeoisie (including students and youth) and the bourgeoisie (of large merchants, entrepreneurs and professionals) has become engulfed in the tidal wave of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism that has swept the country.

The conflicts between Sinhala and minority groups, which have now become the basis of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism could be summarised as follows :

a) Competition between Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim merchant capital, industrialists and other large-scale interests which have increased with the 'open' economy since 1977.

b) Competition between professionals of the Sinhala and Tamil communities.

c) Competition between small businessmen, shopkeepers and petty traders of all communities.

d) Competition for limited job opportunities between Sinhalese and Tamils in white collar jobs.

e) An intense scramble for place in schools and universities and the increase in bitter communal recriminations between Sinhalese and Tamils on this issue.

f) The prevalence among the working-class of antagonism to minority working-people in a period of inflation, unemployment and continuous racist propaganda in the Sinhala press.

g) Antagonism between rural Sinhalese and plantation workers, as a result of trade and employment rivalry and increased racist propaganda

Constitutional Enshrinement of Sinhala Buddhism

While the propaganda war against the Tamil minority was being intensified in the 1970's Sinhala Buddhist ideology became constitutionally legitimised in the two new constitutions of the decade, the 1972 constitution of the Bandaranaike government and the 1978 Constitution of the Jayawardena government.

The massive electoral victory in 1970 of the United Left Front (composed of the SLFP, LSSP and CP) led by Sirima Bandaranaike, had raised hopes of a solution to the ethnic problem which had by then become critical. But instead, the minorities were further disillusioned during the ULF period of government (1970-77), and were especially disappointed by the new Republican Constitution of 1972. Its author, Dr. Colvin R. de Silva leader of the LSSP, who was Minister of Constitutional Affairs, had laid great emphasis on the radical content of the constitution. But for the minorities, the 'socialist democracy envisaged in the constitution, was seen to be confined to Sinhala Buddhists and could not, by definition, be either socialist or very democratic. After the landslide victory of the UNP in 1977 which followed by communal rioting against Tamils including plantation workers, a new constitution was adopted in 1978, which ostensibly gave more rights to the minorities and was said to be based on 'democratic socialism'. But there is no question that the 1978 constitution too, continued to give primacy to the Sinhala Buddhists, and saw the beginnings of the decline of democracy.

Sinhala Only

The constitution in force from independence in 1948 to 1972, had neither enumerated fundamental rights nor made any declaration on language or religion; but under the important

section 29 (b & c) of this constitution, parliament could not enact laws which made 'persons of any community or religion liable to disabilities or restrictions to which persons of other communities or religions are not made liable; nor could parliament confer on persons of any community or religion and privilege or advantage which is not conferred on persons of other communities or religion'. (emphasis added)

The Constitution of 1972, in the framing of which Left parties played an important role, abrogated these safeguards to minorities. The principle of 'Sinhala Only' which had been in existence for 25 years, was enshrined in the constitution by the provision (Section 7) that 'The Official Language of Sri Lanka shall be Sinhala as provided by the official Language Act of 1956'. Regarding the Tamil language, it was stated that 'The use of the Tamil language should be in accordance with the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act of 1958', adding that any regulations under this Act 'shall not in any manner be interpreted as being a provision of the constitution' Article 8 (2). Thus, while Sinhala was to be given a special constitutional status as the 'Official Language', the status of Tamil was to be treated as governed by ordinary legislation.

In addition, the 1972 Constitution stated that 'all laws shall be enacted or made in Sinhala' with a Tamil translation and that 'the language of the courts....shall be in Sinhala' (Section 9 & 11). There was provision for parliament to make alternate provisions in the North and East only in the case of courts exercising original jurisdiction and also for persons in these areas to submit petitions etc. and participate in the proceedings in Tamil.

The 1978 Constitution however made some significant changes in this respect; while Sinhala continued constitutionally to be the official language, Sinhalese and Tamil, were both accepted as 'national languages'. Moreover while Sinhala was to be the language of administration and the language of the courts throughout Sri Lanka; there was provision for Tamil to be also used for administrative purposes and in the transaction of business by public institutions, for all laws to

be published in both languages, and for the exercise of original jurisdiction in Tamil in the Northern and Eastern provinces.

In spite of these provisions the Constitution clearly provided for a privileged and primary status for Sinhala and relegated the minority language to a secondary role.

Buddhism only

Special privileges were accorded to Buddhism by the Constitution of 1972 which declared under Section 6) that 'The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster Buddhism while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Section 18(1) (d)' (that all citizens had the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion). The provision on Buddhism had not existed in earlier constitutions, which were secular. However, although Buddhism was not made the 'State religion,' yet the earlier secular nature of the State was changed. It is ironic that it was the veteran Leftist, Dr. Colvin R. de Silva, who defended the inclusion on this provision, stating that 'the religion Buddhism, hold in the history and tradition of Ceylon a special place and the specialness thereof should be recognised' (Wilson, 1980:104)

In the 1978 Constitution, the 'foremost place' of Buddhism was again constitutionally reaffirmed' and in addition, Buddhist religious institutions were also given a special mention, Article 9 stating: "The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana. while assuring to all religions the rights guaranteed by Articles 10 & 14 (i) (e)' (which guaranteed certain freedoms including freedom of thought, conscience and religion, speech, expression etc.)

Fundamental Rights

One of the flagrant acts of discrimination of the 1972 Constitution was the distinction made between 'persons' and 'citizens' on the question of fundamental rights. While all persons were declared to be equal before the law, and no

person could be 'deprived of life, liberty or security of person except in accordance with the law' (Sect-18(a) (b) only a citizen had the basic fundamental rights of freedom of thought, conscience, religion, speech, publication, movement, choice of residence and the right to promote his own culture; in addition citizens could not be discriminated against on grounds of race, religion, caste or sex, and a citizen could not be arrested, held in custody, imprisoned or detained except in accordance with the law. (Section 18 (1) (c))

This denial of fundamental rights to non-citizens, mainly affected the stateless plantation workers of Indian origin who had not received Sri Lanka citizenship. Not surprisingly this was one of the provisions of the constitution that was sharply criticised both by minority political organisations and trade unions and by those concerned with civil rights. The constitutional denial of basic rights to that group in society that, perhaps, needed them the most, was rectified in the 1978 Constitution. The distinction between citizen and person was eliminated in certain respects; persons were granted freedom of thought, conscience and religion, were equal before the law, had access to shops, hotels, places of worship etc. could not be subject to torture or cruel punishments, or arrested or punished except according to due process of the law and were presumed innocent until proved guilty. However, citizens and persons with 10 years continuous residence were to be free of discrimination on grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion and place of birth, and were to be entitled to the freedom of speech, publication, peaceful assembly, association, movement, promotion of own culture and the freedom to engage in lawful occupation, (Articles 10-14).

Both the Constitutions of 1972 and 1978, in granting a special status and hegemonic role to the Sinhala language and to Buddhism, were in effect, subordinating the rights of minorities to that of the majority group, thereby giving legitimacy to the demands of the Sinhala Buddhists that had been gathering strength for a period of over a century.

11 THE PERSISTENCE OF ETHNIC CONSCIOUSNESS

During the 1983 July pogrom against the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the small yet still articulate liberal elements among the Sinhalese were struck by feelings of horror, shame and guilt. The sense of horror and shame was expressed by a few political parties, trade unions, women's groups, religious bodies and civil rights organisations. Bishop Lkshman Wickremasinghe spoke of the collective guilt of the Sinhalese in a moving pastoral letter which received widespread publicity in Sri Lanka. Following on these initial reactions, there has been, an on-going debate at varying levels of sophistication, on the reasons for the growth in recent years of ethnic violence. There has also been much discussion on the decline of class consciousness and the hegemony of ethnic consciousness among all classes.

This survey of ethnic conflict from 1883-1983 was an attempt to put into historical perspective the question of violence between Sinhalese Buddhists and various other religious and ethnic groups. As evident from the earlier discussion the ideology of the Sinhalese Buddhists during this period was distorted by a false consciousness whose main constituents can be briefly summarised as follows:

1. The self-perceived role of a 'chosen people' with a historic mission to defend both the race and the faith, backed by an appeal to past glories.
2. The belief that the Sinhalese are a hemmed-in minority in the region, a beleaguered group with only one geographical territory, which itself is under threat.
3. The self-perception of the Sinhalese, nurtured by the Sinhala intelligentsia, that they are simple peasant producers in a rural economy, the original 'sons of the soil' believers in the true religion, virtuous, peace-loving, unsuspecting and a prey to all manner of wicked oppressors and exploiters from outside and from other ethnic groups.

4. The vision of the enemy' as non-Sinhalese and non Buddhist-the 'Other,' who is an alien in blood and religion, who is seen as crafty, rapacious and thrifty, unfairly competing in all spheres, taking away the jobs, trading and educational opportunities of the 'innocent' Sinhalese.

This false consciousness has given rise to various incorrect explanations and justifications for violence against minorities. Many Sinhalese have seen ethnic riots as the unfortunate, but understandable response of the majority community against persistent and continuous affronts and threats from aggressive minorities i.e. from the non-Buddhist, non-Sinhala groups in Sri Lanka. The 1915 riots between Sinhalese and Muslims, as well as subsequent riots, including the 1983 pogrom, have been seen in such a light by some sections of the Sinhala intelligentsia. Commenting on the 1915 riots, Anagarika Dharmapala said "The peaceful Sinhalese have at last shown that they can no longer bear the insults of the alien. The whole nation in one day has risen against the Moor people". In addition, sections of the Sinhalese has seen ethnic confrontation as a continuation of ancient animosities. The Sinhalese and Tamils are said to be 'historic enemies'; the political struggle between Dutugemunu and Elara is depicted as a Sinhala-Tamil battle and deeds of Sinhala Kings and heroes in repelling Chola invasions are glorified and kept alive in the current propaganda. It is this view-point that was evident after July 1983 in the statements of leaders of Sinhala parties and of many members of the Buddhist clergy. This explanation, in short justifies the violence in terms of self-defence.

Another false belief is that riots are caused by criminals, hooligans and lumpen elements from the underworld and the city slums who in no way represent the mass of the Sinhalese. The riots that have occurred in Sri Lanka over the decades have evoked such explanations. In 1915, the rioting in the city was attributed by officials to "the criminal classes of Colombo and elsewhere (who) joined in a movement which had become simply predatory and anarchic"; the 1958, riots were described by the police as perpetrated by goondas and the July 1983 attacks have been frequently blamed on thugs and criminals. In

this interpretation, the Sinhalese, as an ethnic group, bear no responsibility, the actual violence being attributed to lawless, anti-social elements.

Conspiracy Theory

Another argument seeks to blame the Left for ethnic riots. It was alleged in 1958 and again in 1983, that the criminal elements involved in rioting were inspired by extremist sections of the Left (insurgents, Naxalites, terrorists) who were bent on a violent overthrow of the government. It was also alleged in 1958, that such Left elements were merely pawns of international Communist intrigue and this canard was used again in 1983. The perception of ethnic riots as a threat to the stability of the ruling class, explains the persistence of various conspiracy theories during periods of violent ethnic conflict: in 1915, the British suspected that the Germans were behind the riots in an effort to undermine Britain during the First World War, and many theories of foreign powers trying to destabilize Sri Lanka were current in July 1983.

Such facile explanations can easily be dismissed, but it is necessary to assess both the ideological content of chauvinism and the strong socio-economic factors that form the background to such beliefs in order to understand the ethnic conflicts of the past 100 years. In doing so, however one has to analyse not only ways in which ideology is linked to socio-economic realities, but also the way ideology can assume an autonomous existence.

Socio-Economic Factors

A consideration of the economic and social back-ground may not offer a full explanation of ethnic violence, but nevertheless it provides some vital clues to unravelling the question. It is crucial in an analysis of ethnic conflict to have a picture of peripheral capitalism in a colonial and neo-colonial context, with its uneven development, backwardness and inability to radically transform the lives of the masses; it is also important to understand the class structure as well as the economic and political aspirations and grievances of each class, in conditions of lack of access to political power and maldistribution of

wealth. In colonial and post-colonial Sri Lanka, the one overriding problem remained that of underdevelopment and economic uncertainty. Poverty, limited resources, slow growth rates, unemployment and inflation, were the realities that threatened the fabric of society in many ways, as even the basic wants of large sections of the people could not be provided. Since the aspirations of the people for economic security and social status were not satisfied, deprived sections blamed their situation, not on the system as a whole, but on the alleged privileges of minority groups. The lack of opportunities for Buddhists was blamed on the Christians; the difficulties of Sinhala shopkeepers, merchants and petty traders were attributed to Muslim and Indian competitors; difficulties in obtaining bank credit made the Chettiars and Pathans a source of popular hatred, the lack of employment (especially during periods of depression) caused resentment against plantation and urban workers of Indian origin and the scramble for education and prestigious jobs was the basis for the conflict with Sri Lankan Tamils. In all cases, the minorities became the scapegoats for the economic and social deprivation felt by certain classes of the Sinhala people, making it easier for the British and for the post-colonial rulers to follow policies of divide and rule.

Several attempts have been made to explain ethnic riots in such a contextual background, seeing them as an expression of the economic and social discontent and frustrations of deprived sections of the population, fanned by propaganda arousing religious or ethnic animosity. The 1915 riots can be analysed, not so much as a religious quarrel in itself, but as a reflection of economic dislocation, price rises and the political ferment of the period. Similarly, the anti-Malayali agitation of the 1930's was linked to unemployment caused by the depression. The July 1983 riots are also viewed by some in this way. Private sector real wages roughly doubled between the middle 1970's and the beginning of 1980, but steady inflation reduced them by as much as a fourth between the 1980 peak and 1983. Most of those affected were Sinhala and their resentment was directed against the Tamil people who were perceived to be beneficiaries of the open economy. It is also claimed that Tamils, denied entry into the

state sector and also, to some extent, the organised private sector, had gone in for self-employment where earnings are not adversely affected by inflation in contrast to the situation of fixed wage earners. This relative deprivation of the Sinhalese is seen as one of the factors that triggered off the ethnic violence of 1983.

The ethnic riots and tensions of the post 1977 period have been also explained, in the immediate economic context, by Newton Gunasinghe as the consequences of the open economy, under which different strata and groups, had advanced on uneven lines; ultimately, differential rates of growth led to disparities and deprivations which exploded along ethnic lines. In this analysis, emphasis is placed on the structural changes that occurred in the transfer from a state-regulated economy to an open economy, rather than on the fluctuations of the business cycle and real wages.

What is important (are)....the structural alterations that have occurred in an economy....and the manner in which different social strata emanating from different ethno-religious communities compete with each other in a social context of differential factor endowment; how this competition occurs within a fabric of ideology, political patronage and state intervention, and how suddenly the rules of competition break down, giving rise to open violence. (Gunasinghe, 1984)

In this context, it is therefore, not the urban poor and lumpen sections of the city population who cause the riots; they are merely the temporary 'beneficiaries' of unrest. They use the rare opportunity to come out on to the streets, to break all the norms of bourgeoisie society in respect of law and to rule the roost for a day or two, vent their anger against the 'haves' and help themselves to the property of others. This phenomenon occurs with increasing frequency in South Asia, where there are glaring contrasts between rich and poor. The deprived sections, given a licence to plunder by the racist propagandists, make full use of such occasions to attack whichever minority group has been 'targetted' as the enemy-

whether it be Muslims or Sikhs, as in India, or Tamils or Muslims as in Sri Lanka.

While it is generally recognised that socio-economic factors play a crucial role in ethnic conflict, it is equally important, in considering the persistence of ethnic violence, to take into account the role of ideology. Ideology can be defined as a set of systematically fashioned beliefs and symbols that make the social reality meaningful to a given group of people. An analysis of the beliefs and symbols of Sinhala Buddhists, and the formation and evolution of Sinhala Buddhist consciousness and culture in early history, as well as the colonial and post-colonial periods, is thus of prime importance in understanding recent ethnic violence in Sri Lanka.

Careful historiographical analysis is needed to unravel the constituent elements of this consciousness and to expose the myths, falsehoods and misinterpretations that have become embedded in it. But mythology and history have been so intertwined however, that recent attempt by scholars to separate the two, and give a scientific analysis of Sri Lanka history, have led to their being denounced as traitors by those traditionalists and reactionaries who have a vested interest in misusing history to justify racist politics. (See *Ethnicity and Social Change*, and the strong attacks on this book in the *Sunday Divaina* from October to December 1984).

This has also been the experience in neighbouring countries; in India, when historians like Romila Thapar, H. Mukhia and B. Chandra challenged the racist interpretation of Indian history and rewrote school texts, they were vilified and called "pro-Muslim and pro-Communist" by Hindu bigots and obscurantists who campaigned for the withdrawal of the text books. Similarly in Tamilnadu, attempts by progressive scholars to demystify history, to challenge the glorification and romanticisation of Chola and Pandyan rule, (separating myth from historical fact), and to analyse the socio-economic base of the Dravidian movement, were met with extreme hostility. In Sri Lanka too, Tamil scholars like K. Kailasapathy, who challenged to prevalent view on the 'golden age' of the Cankam period and K. Sivathamby, who critically reassessed the class bias and pro-British attitudes of Arumuga Navalar, hither to revered as a spiritual leader above criticism, were also subject to condem-

nation by Tamil pandits. Thus chauvinism permeates traditional scholarship whether Sinhala or Tamil, Buddhist or Hindu.

This process of analysis and reinterpretation must also be extended to the colonial and postcolonial periods. One should re-evaluate imperialist strategies of 'divide and rule' and the use of ethnic consciousness by ruling groups as a diversionary tactic or as a means of winning popular support.

Part of the debate on the ideological roots of conflict, however, hinges on a much wider issue and leads one to a discussion of the relative autonomy of ideology and forms of consciousness and their articulation with the economic base. According to some, ethnicity has to be viewed as a constituent part of an ideology that is rooted in the past and persists in spite of economic changes or transformations.

While commenting on the weakness of many existing analyses of nationalism and ethnicity, Benedict Anderson proposes the concept of the nation as an imagined community, which in contrast to family and tribe, (whose members know each other), is-

'imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion', and 'a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, it is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that make it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.'

Anderson adds-

'These deaths bring us abruptly face to face with the central problem posed by nationalism : what makes the shrunken imaginings of recent history (scarcely more than two centuries) generate such colossal sacrifices?'

Anderson believes that the beginnings of an answer to this phenomenon are to be sought in the cultural roots of nationalism. (Anderson 1983: 15-16)

Whatever the emphasis one gives to economic or ideological and cultural factors, the whole issue of ethnic and class

consciousness and the inter-action of economic and political factors on consciousness and ideological must be closely analysed. The assumption that precapitalist ideologies based on caste, religion and ethnicity would disappear or at least diminish with the development of capitalism has also to be reconsidered and answers have to be found to the central question-why does ethnic consciousness persist and indeed grow in strength during a period of development, a period in which education permeates the country, scientific and technological knowledge becomes widespread and rationality, at least in theory hold away in the economic sphere? Those on the Left are also particularly concerned to understand why the working masses of Sri Lanka, who had attained a level of consciousness which enabled them to lead militant class actions based on unity between workers of all ethnic groups, have now come under the sway of ethnic prejudices.

What is more, while division along ethnic lines is detrimental to the interests of the working-class, intensification of ethnic antagonisms and their eruption into violence may also be against the interests of the bourgeoisie. Today the open economy demands-for its success a stable polity which will be attractive to foreign investors : but sections of the very bourgeoisie who are behind the open economy have been responsible not only for rousing ethnic emotions, but for taking up rigid positions which prevent a peaceful settlement of the ethnic issue. Why then is ethnic consciousness so powerful that it drives two classes - the bourgeoisie and the proletariat - to forget their class interests as well as their antagonisms and band themselves into a block against other ethnic groups? This is one of the fundamental questions to which we must seek an answer.

It is necessary to remind ourselves that the persistence of ethnic consciousness is not peculiar to Sri Lanka. Ethnic conflicts, explode periodically in many parts of India: in Malaysia. inspite of rapid economic growth, serious race riots erupted in 1969 and today the doctrine of the bhumi putra makes the Chinese a tolerated, but disfavoured group. In the case of Sri Lanka, as in some of other newly independent countries, we have to recognise that in the process of 'nation building' after decolonisation, the major ethnic group has attempted to equate its own ethnic identity with the national identity.

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The earlier sections of this study discussed the contexts in which ethnic hostility had manifested itself in Sri Lanka at various periods over the last century and tentatively sought

some explanations for these occurrences. Deeper studies are necessary of the complex ways in which ethnic and national consciousness originate and of the interaction and interplay of economic and political factors on consciousness and ideology. Such an analysis of chauvinism in the majority community and the reactions to such chauvinism in the minority groups can only be done by scholars from all communities who are prepared to be objective and rational. Such studies can only be effectively done, however, in an atmosphere where academics and researchers are free from victimisation, witch-hunts and smear campaigns.

In conclusion one must emphasize that chauvinism is not in the interests of the working masses and that it is not central to Left ideology. Sri Lankan workers can proudly claim that for forty years (from the 1890s to 1930) their organizations followed policies of joint class action, even in periods when revivalists of various hues tried to promote antagonisms against minority groups. In fact, even after the earlier working-class leaders of the 1920s became racist in the 1930s, the organised workers in following decades gave expression to class as opposed to ethnic consciousness, in a series of militant struggles under Left leadership. Today too, it is the advanced section of the working people and the radical intelligentsia who can help to bring the country out of the ethnic mire into which it has descended. At the moment, rationality is at a low ebb. The myths of Aryan origin, the myth of Vijaya, and the promotion of 'heroes of the race' such as Dutugemunu, are all having a new lease of life and have again become powerful symbols for arousing ethnic passion. Buddhism, at least in its institutional and ritual aspects, is enjoying a revival and continues to receive the patronage of the state as well as of all political parties. The ideals of socialism are being quietly forgotten, even by the Left. The newspapers significantly, are not only full of racism and jingoism but abound in astrological predictions and stories of ghosts, demons and poltergeists; an array of god-men, false bishops, charismatic monks, gurus, and mumbo-jumbo men are also active, reflecting the tensions and uncertainties of these troubled times. The struggle will therefore be a long and hard one, but one can only hope that reason will sooner or later prevail.

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