

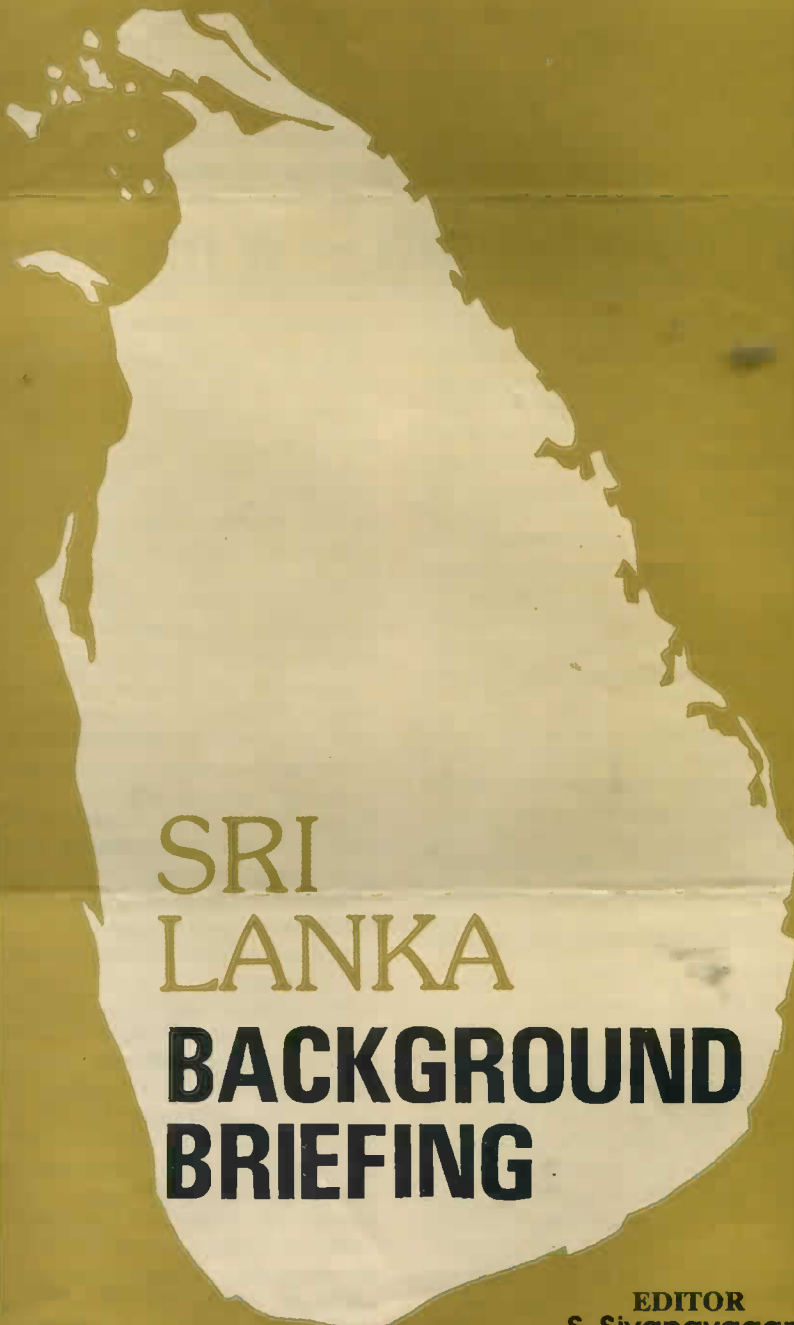
PEOPLE
in the news



Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike



Savumiamoorthy Thondaman



**SRI
LANKA
BACKGROUND
BRIEFING**

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தமிழ்த் தேசிய ஆய்வுக் கட்டுரைகள்

Two people — totally different in many respects, and between whom there is no love lost — have been in the news recently, in Sri Lanka. These two are likely to make more news in the coming months. They are : Savumiamoorthy Thondaman who is the acknowledged leader of the vast majority of plantation Tamils and Minister of Rural Industrial Development in the present government; and Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike, twice Prime Minister in the past and now emerging as a distinct threat to President Jayawardene's stay in power.

A quick chain of events occurred within the last one month that might well upset the political equilibrium in Sri Lanka — the virtual raising of the flag of "revolt" by Minister Thondaman that directly led to the government deciding to grant Sri Lankan citizenship to 94,000 "stateless" persons and to their children born after October 30, 1964; the surprise decision by President Jayawardene to restore civil rights to Mrs. Bandaranaike; and now the terrifying call by Mrs. Bandaranaike to the Sinhalese to get ready for a "war" with the Tamil estate workers of Indian

origin. Speaking at a SLFP rally at Pelmadulla, in the hill country region, on January 21, she is reported as having said : "Tamil M.P.s will come to Parliament from Nuwara Eliya, Bandarawela, Moneragala and even Ratnapura", following the Government's decision to give citizenship to the stateless Tamils. "Today we are being attacked from the North. If we get attacked from the hill country in addition, the Sinhalese will have no alternative but to jump into the sea", she said. As some political observers in Colombo have noted, this is nothing short of "an open incitement to racial violence". The Buddhist clergy have already anticipated Mrs. Bandaranaike's reversal of form and would undoubtedly lend her their full might.

While on the one hand, the Tamils have to prepare themselves for another major bloodbath, if this trend continues, it could also mean on the other hand, the beginning of a process of destabilisation in the South, a development which would be to the ultimate benefit of Tamils. Should that happen, Mr Thondaman could well take credit for it !

Thondaman — a master of Realpolitik

On 10th December, 1985, President Jayawardene was hosting visiting Pakistan President Zia at dinner. All Cabinet Ministers were invited. Before they sat down in dine, the two Presidents, along with some Ministers were chatting informally. At one point in the conversation — according to a Colombo report — President Zia asked Mr. Jayawardene when he proposed to visit Yugoslavia. President J. replied : Not in the immediate future. There are important matters at home. And then he waved a hand at Rural Industrial Development Minister Thondaman who was in the group, and said : He is also giving me problems. That needs looking after !

Apparently everyone chuckled with good humour, but in point of fact, Minister Thondaman's announcement of a 3-month programme of "meditation and prayer" in the Tea country had given the government a big jolt. The most succinct reaction — expressive of Govt. and Sinhala opinion — appeared in the Sunday WEEKEND of 29th December which ran the banner headline :- PRAY AND BE DAMNED — Govt's answer to Thondaman's prayer".

Apart from the publicity build-up in the Sri Lankan Press, that came in the wake of Thondaman's move, the Ceylon Workers' Congress bought full page advertising space in the INDIAN EXPRESS of December 13, carrying the full text of the CWC "declaration" (THE HINDU had declined, for unknown reasons, to accept the advertisement). While calling upon the CWC membership to observe the period from Thai Pongal Day (January 14) to Tamil and Sinhala New Year Day (April 15) as a period of "prayer and meditation" and "meaningful preparation for our campaign to achieve national reconciliation through non-violence and peaceful dialogues", from morning to forenoon, Mr. Thondaman was in reality, threatening a half-day strike, but to which in language and content and declared objectives no one could take objection, least of all President Jayawardene who is a known

practitioner of deceptive semantics !

The first tough reaction to the half-day prayers was the Govt. announcement that only half-day's wages could be paid to those taking part. At which, the CWC dropped the hint that it might become necessary to hold FULL DAY prayers ! It was getting obvious by that time, that despite warnings to Mr. Thondaman by undisclosed "government sources" not to rock the Govt. boat too much, and Editorial sermons by the Colombo Press, the initiative had passed into the hands of the CWC leader.

Meanwhile, Mr. Thondaman had arrived in India, and had a meeting with Rajiv Gandhi in the privacy of the Prime Ministerial plane from Madras to Delhi on 7th January. Since it was not known what the tenor of the discussion was, it gave Colombo additional food for thought. By the time Mr. Thondaman flew back to Colombo on the 10th, it was obvious that the Jayawardene government had taken a hard decision to climb down from the mountain tops on the question of the "stateless".

The spotlight then turned on the plush Nawaloka Hospital where Mr. Thondaman had sought admission for a medical check-up. Minister in charge of "War" Lalith Athulathmudali, who apparently did not relish the idea of opening a "second front" in the plantations, held various "emergency sessions" with Thondaman and Indian High Commissioner Dixit, on behalf of President Jayawardene. Once the government came out with the official announcement declaring its solemn intentions, on the 15th with the Government of India itself becoming a party to the agreement, President Jayawardene proved to be a greater advocate of the "stateless" than the CWC leader himself. Speaking at a function in Gampaha on the 18th, he said : "If a child without parents is handed over to me, what am I to do ? Am I to throw it into the sea, bury it, burn it, or kill it ? No person with



By God Sir.
More things are wrought
by Prayer than this world
dreams of.

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human feelings could condone it... whichever government is in power, these persons will have to remain in Sri Lanka. Could they be allowed to remain without jobs and without civic rights... it will only drive them to the folds of the terrorists".

That this accord is "a solution for all time" as claimed in the statement issued by the Sri Lanka High Commission in New Delhi, sounds extravagant, not only in the light of previous records of successive Sinhala governments in honouring agreements and pacts, but also in view of the new threat posed by Mrs. Bandaranaike. Nevertheless, to have pushed a government with its seven and a half year obduracy to make such a major commitment, reveals a mastery of realpolitik, which no other Tamil leader had ever shown. Realpolitik has been defined as politics based on realities and material needs, rather than on morals or ideals. Savumiamoorthy Thondaman in this respect, is a leader in the mould of the late Indian Congress leader K. Kamaraj. Totally innocent of any theoretical flourishes, very

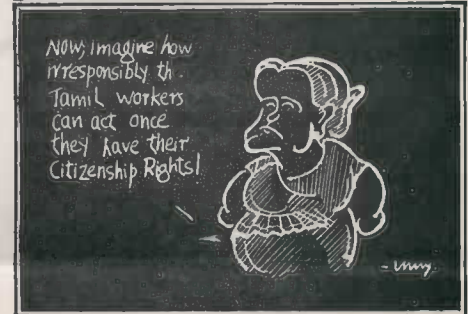
down to earth, practical pragmatic, Mr. Thondaman often gets a clearer grasp of problems and issues because he thinks and acts very close to the bone. If there is one thing he despises, it is the habit of lawyer-politicians' argumentativeness, their tendency to make speeches and to score debating points. When a newspaper correspondent asked him in the course of an interview (The Island — 19th January): "You have said that the Prayer campaign was organised to focus attention on the plight of the stateless, while National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali has said the government's decision was not due to CWC pressure. Do you maintain that it was because of the CWC pressure through Prayer campaign that the Government decided to concede citizenship to the stateless?"

The reply was: "Mr. Athulathmudali is a lawyer. I am not. The fact whether the CWC pressure was answered or this happened on the magnanimity of a circumstantial situation,

I leave it to the people to decide. After all they are the best judges".

"Are you satisfied with the manner in which the Government is handling the ethnic issue?" he was asked. The Minister said: "I am not very happy about it. It should not have been allowed to come to the present situation. I have suggested that there must be a change in approach. Both sides have good lawyers and are arguing their case like any good lawyer. As a result the people are suffering..."

A leading Sri Lankan journalist once asked Mr. Thondaman a question that is in the lips of many people. "How do you perform the role of a Cabinet Minister, a Trade Union leader and an espouser of the cause of minority rights?" The answer was typical of the man. He said: "I am like a woman. A woman can be a mother, a sister and a wife at the same time". A complicated question, answered without any complication, but more convincing than any other answer one can think of! ■



MRS. B IS BACK

Mrs. Sirima Ratwatta Dias Bandaranaike, the world's first woman Prime Minister, who was consigned to political cold storage by President Jayawardene's government over five years ago, came back into the limelight on January 1, 1986. It was not in consequence of any effect or action on her part. President Jayawardene gave her and everyone else a surprise by signing a document granting Mrs. Bandaranaike a "free pardon". It was his first official act for the New Year.

Mrs. Bandaranaike was stripped of her civil rights for 7 years, by a resolution passed in Parliament on October 16, 1980, following a report of a Special Presidential Commission comprising Justice J.G.T. Weeraratne, Justice S. Sharvananda (later to be made Chief Justice), and Justice K.C.E. de Alwis. The Commission which was appointed by President Jayawardene to inquire into and report on allegation of abuse of power by Mrs. Bandaranaike's 1970-77 government held in an interim report, issued on Sept. 24, 1980, that six charges against her of misuse or abuse of power and three charges of abuse of power and one of corruption against her former Finance Minister, the late Felix Dias Bandaranaike, had been established.

Among the charges against Mrs. Bandaranaike were that she had prolonged until 1977 the state of Emergency proclaimed in 1971 although conditions for such continuance had ceased to exist; suppressed legitimate political opposition and harassed political opponents; approved of the disruption of a campaign by the UNP; interfered with police investigations into an alleged threat to the life of Mr. Junius Richard Jayawardene, then Leader of the Opposition; and now President of the Republic; caused the eviction of a monk from his home; and had another political opponent evicted.

A tense situation developed after the Government decided to deprive Mrs. Bandaranaike and Mr. Felix Dias Bandaranaike of their civil rights. President Jayawardene

accused the SLFP in a speech on Oct. 12, 1980, of attempting to create "chaos and bloodshed" and declared that "some offences against the state are punishable with death". Public meetings and demonstrations in Colombo were banned on the following day, and the armed forces were put on a general alert. The Government on October 14 indicated its intention to declare a state of emergency, but shortly afterwards the National Security Council decided that the situation did not justify such a measure. No disturbances in fact occurred, apart from a few minor cases of sabotage in the provinces.

During the debate on Oct. 16 on government resolution to deprive Mrs. Bandaranaike and Mr. Felix Dias Bandaranaike of their civil rights and to expel Mrs. Bandaranaike from Parliament, the Parliament building was sealed off by troops and armoured cars patrolled the streets. Before the debate began, TULF leader and then Leader of the Opposition Mr. A. Amirthalingam proposed that it should be adjourned, as Mrs. Bandaranaike's appeal against the Commission's findings was before the Supreme Court and the matter was therefore sub judice, his objection being overruled by the Speaker (Mr. Bakir Markar). After a heated debate, the resolution to deprive Mrs. Bandaranaike of her civil rights for 7 years and to expel her from the House was adopted by 139 votes to 18, (the TULF and SLFP members voting against and Mrs. Bandaranaike herself abstaining), and that to deprive Mr. Felix Dias Bandaranaike of his civil rights for seven years by 139 votes to 19.

A bill adopted on Oct. 17 banned persons who had been deprived of their civil rights from addressing election meetings or taking any part in the electoral process. The SLFP political bureau, however, decided on Oct. 28 that Mrs. Bandaranaike should remain President of the party. Applications by Mrs. Bandaranaike and Mr. Felix Dias Bandaranaike for a writ of certiorari quashing the Commis-

sion's findings were dismissed by the Supreme Court on Jan. 15, 1981.

While there was no doubt that President Jayawardene's move on Jan. 1 took everyone by surprise, it is significant that hardly anyone was prepared to accept it as a generous New Year gesture on his part. Even the gov. owned DAILY NEWS had this to say the following morning: "The hottest talking point in political circles yesterday was — What is the President's strategy?"

Another Colombo report said: "The 69-year old former Prime Minister who ruled the island of 15 million people for 12 years (1960-65 and 1970-77) declined to speculate on the New Year surprise. "I don't know the reason. The Government should know. You must ask them". A little later, she added: "The President must have succumbed to international pressure". She mentioned the resolution passed at the recent International Conference of Liberal Movements held at Madrid which called for the restoration of her civic rights.

"She revealed that the question of restoring her civic rights was raised first by the Indian Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, when she met Mr. Jayawardene at the Non-Aligned Movement summit in New Delhi in October 1983. J.R. had agreed. Rajiv had also raised the matter repeatedly. But nothing happened. She added: "Every time Romesh Bhandari met me during his visits to Colombo; he told me that he had raised the issue with J.R. Every time J.R. told him that some person or other was against it."

"She avoided naming the persons who opposed the granting of her civil rights. "You people know it better", she smiled. Political circles believe that the Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mr. Ranasinghe Premadasa was the main opponent.

The Colombo report adds: "Her personal

MRS. B IS BACK!

hardening became evident when she made the pardon itself an issue. She said she never asked for a pardon hitting directly at Mr. Premadasa, who repeatedly proclaimed that a pardon could be granted only if Mrs. Bandaranaike asked for it" (Hindu, 12/1).

When pressmen suggested that the real reason for Mr. Jayawardene's sudden turn-about might be to get her Sri Lanka Freedom Party's support to solve the ethnic conflict, Mrs. B. quipped: "But it's left to me" While that sounded certainly logical, not so convincing was her initial response that "international pressure" might have made the obdurate President succumb. An interesting clue that suggests a more convincing motivating factor behind the President's action was published in the Colombo newspaper, the SUN, which quoted Mrs. Bandaranaike herself as saying: "I never asked for a pardon. I have done no wrong or committed any crime to ask anyone for pardon. HE (PRESIDENT JAYAWARDENE) LOVES HIMSELF MORE THAN THE COUNTRY. THAT'S WHY HE RESTORED MY CIVIL RIGHTS"

Was the President getting concerned with an increasing erosion of his power base within the government, and the party? Was he also becoming uncertain of Plantation leader Thondaman's continued backing? Was the President — by activating Mrs. Bandaranaike — merely extending the checks and balances of "power play" beyond the governmental arena? And creating in Mrs. Bandaranaike an external counter-weight to beat off challenges from within?

Whether Mrs. Bandaranaike can use this opportunity as a springboard to bounce back into power is left to be seen. That cannot certainly have been part of President Jayawardene's design. But given her more distinguished record as head of government (for nearly twelve years) and as a more authentic representative of Sinhala Buddhist opinion, the prospect cannot be overlooked.

Mrs. Bandaranaike first became Prime Minister at the age of 44, on July 21, 1960, within 10 months of the assassination of her Prime Minister husband S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. She comes of a Kandyan, land-owning aristocratic family and had her secondary level education at a leading Roman Catholic Girls' school in Colombo, the St. Bridget's Convent, although herself a Buddhist. She married the Oxford-returned Bandaranaike in 1944 and has two daughters, Sunethra and Chandrika, and a son Anura, who is now Leader of the Opposition in the Sri Lanka Parliament.

Before her husband's death, she took no direct part in politics, but was active in social work among women, notably as President of the Mahila Samiti movement which aims at raising the living standards of women in rural areas. After the assassination of Mr. Bandaranaike in September 1959 (which took place in her presence), she proposed to contest his former seat as an Independent but was forestalled by the dissolution of Parliament, and in December refused the Presidency of the S.L.F.P. She did not stand in either the

March or the July elections, but on both occasions campaigned actively on behalf of the S.L.F.P. and accepted the party presidency in May. Her public speeches, in which she appealed to the voters to enable her husband's work to be continued, were generally considered to have been mainly responsible for the party's recovery after the internal crisis which followed Mr. Bandaranaike's death.

The well-known Sinhala historian K.M. de Silva makes this wry comment: "At the time of his assassination Bandaranaike was no longer the masterful politician he had been in 1956-57, since when his hold on the electorate had weakened. But his murder dramatically changed the political situation. After a few months of drift and regrouping, the SLFP, under the leadership of Bandaranaike's widow, emerged more powerful than ever before. Death is the essence of myth-making, and the Party had before it the inestimable advantage of the Bandaranaike myth with which to face the electorate and to fashion the discomfiture of its rivals on the political scene". (History of Sri Lanka, Oxford University Press).

But once ensconced in power, Mrs. Bandaranaike lost no time in being more decisive and more ruthless in carrying forward her husband's policies than her late husband himself. If her husband rode on a massive wave of Sinhala Buddhist emotion in order to come to power, his "intellectual" approach stood as a constant constraint in translating that emotion into practical politics. The "weeping widow" as she was referred to by her denigrators during her election campaign, was not hampered by the weight of any such intellectual baggage. At the opening of the new Parliament on August 12, 1960, the announcement of her policy measures included — the implementation of the 1956 Official Language Act of her late husband, so as to enforce Sinhala as the official language by Dec. 31 of that year, giving Buddhism its "due recognition and its proper place", nationalisation of Life Insurance business; revision of the Constitution and the establishment of a Republican form of government; the take-over of two large newspaper groups; the take-over of Assisted schools; and anti-corruption measures. Drastic austerity measures were also announced to preserve the country's dwindling exchange reserves.

It was during Mrs. Bandaranaike's rule that Tamil nationalism became a cohesive force. A "Hartal" (complete stoppage of work) organised by the Federal Party under the leadership of the Gandhian-style leader S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, took place throughout the Northern and Eastern provinces on Jan. 2, 1961, in protest against the enforcement of Sinhala.

A Direct Action campaign was launched on January 30, with volunteers distributing leaflets appealing to Government employees not to cooperate in the implementation of the Official Language Act. The second stage of the campaign opened on February 20 in Jaffna where 250 volunteers lay down outside

the provincial secretariat to prevent government employees from entering. Picketing was soon extended to Batticaloa in the East, and within a week the entire governmental administration was paralysed in the North and East by non-violent means. This Satyagraha of 1961 still remains on record as the first and last occasion in which a 100% collective will of the Tamil people was exercised on the government of the day.

In April, a Civil Disobedience campaign was launched. Tamil volunteers courted arrest; refused to purchase bus tickets; ran their own postal service in Jaffna; and on April 17, Mrs. Bandaranaike declared a state of emergency; prescribed the Federal Party; imposed a 48-hour curfew. By April 24, 59 Tamil leaders were under arrest. This also marked the beginning of the induction of an "occupation army" in Jaffna. The famed Queen's Counsel, constitutional lawyer and civil rights champion, S. Nadesan, who was then an Independent member in the Senate (the Upper Chamber) speaking in the Senate on May 2, alleged that the military had been "let loose on the Northern and Eastern Provinces, and from all accounts are behaving, at any rate so far as the Jaffna Peninsula was concerned, as if they were a conquering army in occupation of enemy territory"

While Mrs. Bandaranaike's record — as far as Sinhala-Tamil relations are concerned — is as black as President Jayawardene's, she has, from the Sri Lankan point of view a better performance sheet, in other areas. Says, historian K.M. de Silva: "Among the most notable achievements of Mrs. Bandaranaike's first government was the understanding she reached with Lal Bahadur Shastri, the Indian Prime Minister, in October 1964, on the question of the Indian minority in Sri Lanka... Mrs. Bandaranaike was justified in claiming that the agreement reached with the Indian government marked a great advance, for the Indian government had been persuaded to recognise its obligations to persons of Indian origin in the island by undertaking to confer Indian citizenship on those who were to be repatriated and by accepting the principle of compulsory repatriation..."

As far as Foreign Affairs went, "her years as Prime Minister coincided with a remarkable creative phase in the diplomacy of the non-aligned states. The conference of non-aligned states held at Belgrade in 1961 was a landmark in the history of what may be called Third World identity, and was followed three years later by a conference in Cairo. At both Mrs. Bandaranaike was an enthusiastic participant, identifying herself and Sri Lanka unreservedly with the diplomatic initiatives which followed from the conference... Nothing demonstrated the activist flavour of Sri Lanka's foreign policy better than the conference held in Colombo on Mrs. Bandaranaike's initiative in 1962 to mediate in the Sino-Indian dispute. But this one conspicuous intervention in the role of a mediator in international disputes did not achieve any significant results". (K.M. de Silva — A History of Sri Lanka).