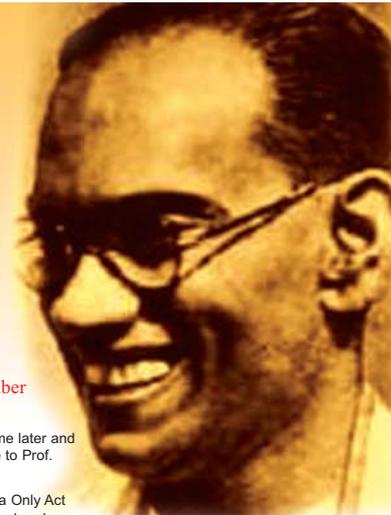


September 2009

Sannasa HORIZON SEE BEYOND

A Recollection on the Bandaranaike Era

50th anniversary of assassination of SWRD Bandaranaike falls on the 26th of September



As we approach the 50th anniversary of the passing of a leader whose name is inextricably linked to the politics of ethnicity, language and nationalism in Sri Lanka since the independence six decades ago, it is pertinent to re-examine the legacy of SWRD Bandaranaike.

Now that the campaign of terrorism associated with the ethnic conflict which resulted in so much destruction and misery to the nation during the past quarter century seems to have been brought to a standstill, we can look at the contribution of Mr. Bandaranaike's actions and inactions to the escalation of the ethnic conflict with the benefit of hindsight.

Mr. Bandaranaike's name will forever be associated with the so-called Sinhala Only Act of 1956. It is relevant here to recall the events that led to the Sinhala Only Bill which was passed in 1956. As in any multi-ethnic country resurgent from colonialism, the position of the majority community and their language and religion vis-a-vis the minorities became a crucial political issue with the granting of independence to Ceylon. With the country's second general election looming, which was fast shaping up to be a plebiscite on the issue of official language, Sir John Kotalawela, the then Prime Minister on a visit to India was asked by a journalist in 1955, a very simple question: "What are your plans for the official language of the country?" Sir John abruptly replied: "Well, Sinhala and Tamil will be the Official Languages of Ceylon" This brought about an uproar in the country with Sinhala nationalists and Buddhist clergy widely campaigning against two official languages. The Tamil leadership was sticking to their pre-independence policy of 50/50 status for the two languages which was also endorsed by the Left politicians. Meanwhile, the headline sections of the Sinhala nationalists and leading Buddhist monks compelled the opposition movement com-

prising of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and other nationalist socialist parties preparing for upcoming elections under the banner of Mahajana Eksath Peramuna to adopt a policy of Sinhala only as the official language. It seemed that a groundswell of public opinion was forming in favour of "Sinhala Only" as the official language which compelled the governing United National Party to change its policy for electoral advantage.

A conference of the UNP was held at Kelaniya where a resolution was moved by J.R. Jayewardene, the Leader of the Lower House, and it was passed unanimously with the Tamil and Muslim members in the Working Committee abstaining it was ratified that the Sinhala language should be the only official language of Ceylon. However, as the government did not have a mandate to implement this, it was decided to ask for a mandate one and a half years before the elections were due. They decided that the Parliament should be dissolved and an election should be held and that the party campaign for the policy of one language, that is, Sinhala Only. With the motion carried, S. Nadesan of Kankasanturai and Mr. V. Nalliah of Kalkudah, Minister and deputy Ministers and Mr. H.S. Ismail and a number of other Tamil speaking members resigned from the UNP. When the Parliament was dissolved and a general election was called for April 1956, both the governing UNP and the major opposition force, Mahajana Eksath Peramuna stood for "Sinhala Only". When the election campaign began, the Leftist Sama Samaja and Communist parties who stood for parity of status for both languages, decided on a no contest pact with the MEP despite their opposition to the Sinhala Only policy, because they vehemently opposed the anti-working class policies of the UNP led by the authoritarian Sir John Kotalawala.

Whether the genesis of the ethnic conflict could be traced back to 1956 or the Citizenship Acts of 1948-49 or the removal of Constitutional safeguards to minorities in 1972 is something which history will decide.

The general elections resulted in a landslide victory for the MEP and the Left parties in the Sinhala majority areas and the motion of Sinhala Only draft bill recognizing the status of Tamil language and of English as a link language was presented to the Parliament. All these aspects were considered and the Legal Draftsman prepared the bill according to the instructions given by the Cabinet. However when the news of the forthcoming bill was released to the press, the protests stirred up by the nationalists and clergy culminated with the "fast un-to-death" by a headline Sinhala nationalist academic, Prof. F.R. Jayasuriya demanding that Sinhala must be the only official language of the country. Giving into the public protests, Mr. Bandaranaike decided to abandon the other language clauses in the bill and introduce amendments to safeguard the

minorities at an appropriate time later and offered a glass of orange juice to Prof. Jayasuriya to break the fast.

A few months later the Sinhala Only Act was voted for by the government party members and the UNP which had reduced to just eight Members of Parliament. While every left member and the minority Federal Party's ten members and the two members of Tamil Congress voted against, the Bill was passed. However, Mr. Bandaranaike continued to negotiate with the Tamil leaders, particularly, the Federal Party led by SJV Chelvanayagam, which held ten seats in the Parliament. This produced what was called the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact.

Inevitably, the Pact was not allowed to come into fruition with the vested interests opposing the devolution of power and instigating those extremist nationalist elements and the main Opposition towards street demonstrations against Bandaranaike's "selloff" to



Bandaranaike - Chelvanayagam

Tamil.

Mr. JR Jayewardena, who was not even a member of the Parliament, led a procession to Kandy on foot to appeal to the Sacred Tooth to prevent the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact from being implemented. However, they were not allowed to pass Imbulgoda when blockaded by Mr. Bandaranaike's supporters in his stronghold of Attanagalla. A large group of Buddhist monks too converged at the prime minister's residence at Rosmead Place threatening mass hunger strikes until the Pact was with-



By S Piyasena

former Deputy High Commissioner of Sri Lanka to India

drawn. Thus, Bandaranaike's reluctance to be steadfast against popular parochial politics robbed an opportunity to prevent the ethnic conflict which brought in untold miseries to the nation's future generations. This series of events were repeated a decade later when Dudley Senanayake-SJV Chelvanayagam Pact too was derailed by the then Opposition SLFP, ironically with the help of some sections of the Left.

Whether the genesis of the ethnic conflict could be traced back to 1956 or the Citizenship Acts of 1948-49 or the removal of Constitutional safeguards to minorities in 1972 is something which history will decide. However, to his credit it must be recorded that although SWRD Bandaranaike was caught-up with fast changing events of which he had no control in his brief two and a half years in power, he resolved them without recouring to force and as a truly peace-loving statesman.

The true legacy of SWRD Bandaranaike, however can be traced back to the landmark reforms he introduced to the grass root electoral politics of the country.

Bandaranaike was wedded to parliamentary norms and rule of democracy. As a young novice in the State Council, he was elected to the Committee on Local Administration. The Minister, Mr. Batuwantudawe, did not have the political clout of Bandaranaike. Even though he was not a Minister and was only a member of the committee, he formed the association, 'Samastha Lanka Gam Sabha Sammelanaya' and proceeded to legalize the election to the village committees island-wide. It was a simple election for the people by the people of the village. There were no political parties in the village. At the nominations, the villagers got together and elected one of their candidates to be the member of the village committee. The village committee had a chairman, who had some sort of executive power over the affairs of the village. He was probably paid a very small nominal allowance. The other members were voluntary. No salaries were paid. And this system of Village Councils continued to function until the middle of 1970s and slowly died out due to official and bureaucratic negligence.

Mr. Bandaranaike believed that civic minded members of every community should join the political process through the village councils. He led by example in that although he had broader horizons, he entered the inconspicuously remote Egodawatte Peruwa Village Council in his electorate and functioned for a while as its chairman. When he became Minister of Local Administration in 1936, village councils were expanded into town/urban/municipal councils and under his watch fledgling experiment of applying adult franchise to grass