

A NATIVISTIC REACTION TO COLONIALISM: THE SINHALA-BUDDHIST REVIVAL IN SRI LANKA

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Not very long after the British had succeeded in accomplishing what two earlier European powers — the Portuguese and the Dutch — had failed to do for a period of about three hundred years¹ a Commission of Inquiry sent by the Colonial Office to investigate and make recommendations on the island's affairs declared that Ceylon was the "fittest spot in our Eastern Dominions in which to plant the germ of European Civilization whence we may not unreasonably hope that it will hereafter spread over the whole of those vast territories."² This hope never materialized. On the contrary within a few decades a resurgence of indigenous culture had begun which proved to be the foundation of the struggle for political independence.

The form of the cultural resurgence which began in the mid 19th century appears to have been defined by nostalgic memories of a glorious past acting upon the humiliations of a dismal present. The great accomplishments of the Sinhalese in the fields of engineering, architecture and the arts had originated in an almost total dedication to the cause of Buddhism.³ National historiography has recorded that the island self-sufficient in worldly requisites, was in spiritual matters the repository of the Buddhist doctrine, as prophesied by the Buddha himself on his deathbed.⁴ Tradition claims that the self-content and

* I wish to thank my colleague Derek De Silva who read the original draft and made many valuable suggestions for its improvement.

¹ The maritime provinces of Ceylon were occupied first by the Portuguese (1505-1658) and then by the Dutch (1658-1796) who during this period made constant attempts to subjugate the Sinhalese kingdom in Kandy and thus became masters of the whole island. The British who ousted the Dutch from the maritime provinces in 1796 were able to bring Kandy under their rule in 1815.

² From the report of Charles H. Cameron Esqr., upon the Judicial Establishments and Procedure in Ceylon (31 January 1832). See G. C. Mendis (ed.) *The Colebrooke-Cameron Papers*, London, 1956, Vol. I, p. 152.

³ See, C. W. Nicholas and S. Paranavitana, *A Concise History of Ceylon*, Colombo, 1961, pp. 116-121; pp. 268-276.

⁴ See *The Mahavamsa* (the 5th cen. historical chronicle), translated by W. Geiger, Colombo, 1950, Ch. VII, verses 1-4.

moral integrity of the people were such that a beautiful maiden of sixteen could walk in perfect safety with a gem in her hand from one end of the island to the other.⁵

Whatever the real causes of the collapse of this civilization might be, in the popular mind it is generally attributed to the invasions of South Indian armies which are depicted in historical chronicles as having breached tanks, plundered monasteries and created much havoc in the land as though they were "the armies of Mara" — the god of Death.⁶

Subsequently, the Sinhalese kingdom was re-established in the South-West, away from the ancient centres of civilization in the Northern-Central and South Eastern regions. Several kingdoms continued their weak existence in the South-West up to the beginning of the 16th century when with the advent of the Portuguese in 1505 a fresh era of adversities befell the Sinhalese. Thereafter an incessant struggle against the Europeans continued for a period of over three centuries when the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British in succession controlled the seaboard and closed in upon the Sinhalese whose only succour lay in the natural defences of the country, its jungles, hilly terrain and a weather inhospitable to the European. Finally, the Sinhalese kingdom in Kandy, in moral and military reserves equally depleted was ceded to the British by the signing of a convention whereby the British promised, among other things, to "maintain" and "protect" Buddhism to safeguard indigenous customs.⁷

The manner in which these assurances were kept led to wide dissatisfaction. Realization came that the maintenance or the fostering of national cultural traditions could not be expected under the rule of a foreign power. Movements arose for the preservation and upliftment of religious, literary, artistic and other cultural traditions. The struggle for political independence was launched subsequently and freedom won in 1948. Thereafter a process was set in motion during the fifties to remedy the reversals of fortune suffered by the indigenous cultural traditions during the period of foreign rule. The hopes, fears and aspi-

⁵ Based on a claim by King Nissankamalla (1187-1196) in one of his numerous inscriptions.

⁶ *The Culavamsa* (the continuation of *The Mahawamsa*), translated by W. Geiger, Colombo, 1953, Ch. 80, verse 70. For a historical study of the collapse of this civilization see K. Indrapala (ed.) *The Collapse of the Rajarata Civilization*, Ceylon Studies Seminar, Peradeniya, 1971.

⁷ For details of "the Kandyan Convention" see Lennox A. Mills, *Ceylon under British Rule*, Colombo, 1964, pp. 159- ff.

rations of the Sinhalese in the twentieth century may be understood in the light of this background.

Two phases can be distinguished in the cultural renaissance of the Sinhalese society during the 20th century. The first arose in the context of foreign domination as a nativistic assertion which marked millennial tendencies, the second began as a nationalist backlash immediately following the end of colonial rule and reached its climax as an attempt to insure against a future imperilled by the threat of Tamil domination. The Tamils, although minority in the island were regarded as having a numerically strong and politically dangerous alliance in South India, only a few miles across the Palk Strait.

The Beginnings of the Cultural Revivalism

Although the crown of Kandy was ceded to the British in 1815 with contrivance of the traditional power elite — the feudal chieftains and the Buddhist clergy — who believed that the convention signed by them and the British would ensure the safe continuance of traditional institutions, especially those connected with Buddhism, the same power elite very soon appear to have had second thoughts. The outcome of these misgivings was manifested three years later in the form of a rebellion which was subdued with severity.⁸ Subsequently opposition to foreign rule was expressed sometimes by attempts at rebellion⁹ and sometimes by millennial yearnings.¹⁰ It was as if the generation responsible for the cession of 1815 never overcame their feelings of guilt.¹¹ The success of the colonial government in subduing the strivings of the spirit of indigenous protest brought in its wake a strong wave of Christian proselytization.¹² It would have appeared to the Sinhalese elite of the day that the subjugation of the whole island to a 'heathen foreigner' meant the eclipse and perhaps the impending doom of institutions which had hitherto been cherished even by those living in the maritime provin-

⁸ For the rebellion of 1818 see Mills, *op. cit.*

⁹ The incidents of 1820, 1823, 1824, 1842, 1848, 1858 and 1834. See Mills, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-166.

¹⁰ For example, the movement reported by Ivers. See Kitsiri Malal-godda, "Millenialism in Relation to Buddhism", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 12, 4, 1970, pp. 424-441, esp. p. 437.

¹¹ cf. A Kandyan chief is supposed to have asked Governor Torrington (1847-1850), "What good have we gained by British rule if you violate our Treaties — not only cease to protect our religion but on the contrary endeavour to destroy it?" K.M. de Silva, *Social Policy and Missionary Organization in Ceylon, 1840-1885*, London, 1965, p. 107.

¹² See K. M. de Silva, *op. cit. passim.*

ces under virtual foreign rule. Thus the main theme of the insurgent endeavours and the millennial yearnings of the 19th century was the restoration of the *status quo ante*.¹³ In the attempts at insurgency although the erstwhile subjects of the Kandyan kingdom formed the vanguard, they were supported sometimes openly and in the circumstances to the best of their ability by the Sinhalese in the maritime provinces.¹⁴ The Sinhalese people, who in their self-image were a 'chosen people' entrusted with the responsibility of preserving the doctrine of the Buddha in its pristine purity¹⁵ seem to have evolved during this period a nationalism out of their primordial feelings of ethnicity due to the circumstances in which they were placed under the British Raj.

The cultural symbols around which nationalist ideologies could be woven had been unearthed from oblivion by a religious, literary and artistic revival that occurred in the Kandyan kingdom during the second half of the 8th century, several decades before the advent of the British. This movement succeeded in giving a new phase of life to Buddhism, Sinhalese literature and the indigenous arts which had fallen into decline during the foregoing period of about two and a half centuries of warfare with the Portuguese and the Dutch. During a spell of peace which occurred as a result of the conciliatory attitude of the commercially-minded Dutch together with the desire of the war-weary Sinhalese for a breathing space, the renaissance was accomplished mainly through the efforts of a monk named Weliwita Asarana Sarana Saranankara (1698-1778) who was actively supported by the king at the time, Kirithi Sri Rajasinghe (1747-1780). The movement was carried to the other parts of the island by the associates and pupils of Saranankara and the tradition that was re-established continued by pupiliary succession. However, the subsequent fall of the Sinhalese kingdom proved to be a setback to the full flowering of the renaissance spirit.

With the stabilization of the British rule over the whole island during the first half of the 19th century the atmosphere was more suited than ever for the expansion of Western culture. In the face of the growing tide of Christian proselytization and the general westernization of the society the energies of the indigenous cultural elite

¹³ See Michael Roberts, "Variations on the theme of Resistance Movements: the Kandyan Rebellion of 1817-18 and the Later Day Nationalisms of Ceylon", *Ceylon Studies Seminar*, 1970/72 series, no. 9, p. 21.

¹⁴ Thus for example Puran Appu and Gongalegoda Banda, two of the leading figures in the rebellion of 1848 — the most serious since 1818 — were from the maritime provinces.

¹⁵ See Malalgoda, *op. cit.*, pp. 431-432.

was gathered together and mobilized in three centres of Buddhist learning, namely, Paramadhammacetiya (founded in 1849), Vidyodaya (founded in 1873) and Vidyalankara (founded in 1875). These institutions which were called *pirivenas*, being attached to Buddhist temples became in addition to being centres of learning the nursing grounds of Sinhalese patriotism. The future cultural elite which was to launch a militant Sinhalese-Buddhist re-assertion was nurtured in these three *pirivenas* and their offshoots.

The initial waves of the 19th century revivalism were mainly religious. The Buddhist religion had been, during the days of the Sinhalese kingdom, identified totally with the affairs of state. During the era of Portuguese and Dutch rule in the maritime provinces however, it had suffered severe setbacks. And, with the subjugation of the whole island by the British it soon became apparent that contrary to the pious hopes embodied in the Kandyan Convention, Buddhism was neglected as "heathen idolatry" and facilities provided for the spread of Christianity.¹⁶ This, naturally, created a sense of injury and brought about eventually a militant flavour to the religious activities of the Buddhists. At the forefront of this movement was the new bourgeoisie which had come into being as a result of the modernization and expansion of the economy during the 19th century. Also there appeared a militant type of Buddhist monk who was to be the preceptor and guide to the movement: the 19th century saw the metamorphosis of the Buddhist monk from a world-renouncing religious ascetic to a religio-nationalist-political leader. The fiery orator Migettuwatte Gunananda (1823-1890) and the scathing pamphleteer Batteramulle Subhuti¹⁷ (1854-1915) are two notable embodiments of this tendency. Guided by this type of leadership and financed by the upward mobile bourgeoisie, a vigorous counteroffence was launched against the rising tide of Christian proselytization which was being carried out through the missionary school system and patronage in government employment. The Buddhist reassertion received a strong impetus from the involve-

¹⁶ For the attitude of the colonial government towards Buddhism see K. M. de Silva, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-137.

¹⁷ Ven. Gunananda who led the Buddhist side in a number of public controversies against the Christians has been depicted by Olcott as "the most brilliant polemic orator of the island, the terror of the missionaries". (*Old Diary Leaves*, 1878 1883, quoted by V. K. Jayawardene, *The Rise of the Labour Movement in Ceylon*, Durham, 1972, p. 43). And Ven. Subhuti was the author of works such as *Durvadi Hrdaya Vidaranaya*, "The Exposure of the Heretic Soul" (Colombo, 1889) an acrimonious attack on the Christian Church.

ment of Col. Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), an American, and the Buddhist Theosophical Society founded by him (in 1880) which established consequently an effective counter force to the Christian missionary school system.¹⁸

Thus by the turn of the century Buddhist revivalism which began on a defensive note had almost taken the upper hand as the following excerpts from a contemporary Christian document shows:

“1903 — This year the Buddhists became very active in opposing Christian work and establishing opposition schools. Christianity cannot be said to be in a thriving condition here: converts are few and the best of them seem to be glad to get away to other parts.

1905 — The Buddhists are now building schools of a more substantial nature, which were thronged with children and in charge of efficient teachers.

1909 — The Buddhist opposition to Christian work is severe and intense and our means to combat it are limited.”¹⁹

The sporadic waves of the 19th century revivalism was to receive during the early years of the 20th century an organizational framework in the Temperance Campaign. The Temperance movement was directed against the policy of the colonial government which began to open liquor shops everywhere with the adoption of the Excise Ordinance of 1912. It became an opportunity for the organization of a mass protest against a regime that was heedless of the moral traditions of the people. Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) who was at the forefront of the campaign compared the present with the past. “The Buddhist kings never gave the Aryan Sinhalese opium, arrack, whisky and from the revenues of the land the people derived manifold advantages . . . what do we see today? Drunkenness, poverty, increase of crime and increase of insanity. The British are giving the Aryan Sinhalese poisons of opium and alcohol which are destructive for the continuance of the Sinhalese race”²⁰

Being an issue on which the sympathy of all sections, religious as well as communal, could be mustered the temperance campaign gave

¹⁸ For details see “Progress of Buddhist Education”, *Souvenir of the Buddhist Theosophical Society on its Diamond Jubilee, Colombo, 1940*, pp. 37-45.

¹⁹ J.W. Balding, *One Hundred Years of Ceylon, or the Centenary Volume of the Church Missionary Society in Ceylon, 1818-1918*, Madras, pp. 21-22, quoted in Ananda Guruge (ed.) *Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, Essays and Letters of Anagarika Dharmapala*, Colombo 1965, p. xxxii.

²⁰ Ananda Guruge, (ed.) *op. cit.*, p. 530.

the elitist class an unprecedented opportunity to identify themselves with the masses and to organize them in a campaign against the colonial government.

Although the temperance campaign had as its aim a common cause cutting across religious and communal boundaries in composition and flavour it was markedly Sinhalese-Buddhist oriented.²¹ At the forefront of the campaign were personalities such as Anagarika Dharmapala, D.B. Jajatilaka (1868-1944), F.R. Senanayake (1882-1926), Piyadasa Sirisena (1875-1946) and John de Silva (1857-1922) who comprised the Sinhalese-Buddhist leadership of the day. Moreover, the movement had in essence an anti-imperialist flavour.²² The following statement of Anagarika Dharmapala may be taken as epitomizing the attitude of the Sinhalese-Buddhist engaged in the campaign:

“This ancient, historic, refined people, under the diabolism of vicious paganism, introduced by the British administrators are now declining and slowly dying away ... the sweet gentle Aryan children of an ancient, historic race are sacrificed at the altar of the whisky drinking, beet-eating, belly-god of heathenism.”²³

The Temperance movement was thus a mission-nativistic and anti-imperialistic in one.

In this manner the early years of the twentieth century was to witness a Sinhalese nation aware of and responding to a glorious cultural heritage and anxious to preserve and foster it in the face of the advances of European religion, customs and values.

Literature and other arts during the early years of the 20th Century

The general enthusiasm in culture awakened by the activities of the 19th century was manifested in a spate of literary, artistic and religious activity. The number of newspapers and periodicals that appeared between 1888 and 1924, a period when the spread of vernacular education was yielding fruit,²³ is an index to the demand of the

²¹ See P.T.M. Fernando, “Arrack, Toddy and Ceylonese Nationalism: Some Observations on the Temperance Movement”, *Ceylon Studies Seminar*, 1969/70 series, No. 9. p. 18.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Ananda Guruge, (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 482-484.

²⁴ The principle of vernacular education was accepted by the colonial government in the early 1840's. The expansion of vernacular education consequently can be seen in the figures pertaining to the following years. See Tables I and II in U.D.I. Sirisena, “Educational Provision and Progress under the laws for Compulsory Education” *Education in Ceylon: A Centenary Volume*, Colombo, 1969, pp. 513-524.

newly created Sinhalese readership. It is recorded that a total of 524 different newspapers and periodicals in Sinhalese appeared during this period; the figures being: 1888 — 1900 = 94; 1901 — 1907 = 47; 1908 — 1918 = 185; 1919 — 1924 = 198.²⁵

Due to the revivalistic energies of the scholars who were associated with the *pirivenas* mentioned earlier, almost all the major classics of Sinhalese literature came to be edited and printed during the second half of the 19th century.²⁶ In addition there was a series of translations²⁷ from English to satisfy the demands of the new readership. More significant is the emergence of the Sinhalese novel towards the end of the 19th century. Although the earliest novels written in Sinhalese were intended to be instruments of Christian proselytization²⁸ it so happened that it soon became the weapon of the Sinhalese-Buddhist protagonist. The most popular novelist of the early years of the twentieth century was Piyadasa Sirisena a tireless champion of the cause of the Sinhalese-Buddhist against Christianity and Western culture. Through his characters who were often made to deliver long discourses, Sirisena castigated the Christian doctrine, the drinking of liquor, eating of meat, western dress and other European customs upholding against them Buddhism, traditional Sinhalese customs, beliefs and values. In one of his numerous novels he claims that "from all our books a little over one lakh of copies has been sold. None of those works was mere empty prattle. Although they may be counted as 'new fictional stories' we have never written a book which does not direct the human mind towards the noble and the righteous doctrine".²⁹

Sirisena's influence was the most dominating factor affecting the novel of the early decades of the twentieth century. The fact that even some of the novelists who had begun their career before him consequently fell under his influence shows the kind of response he was able to evoke in his society. "The influence Piyadasa Sirisena exerted on the society of his time was by no means little. Though few will be interested in his novels today, it must be admitted that the present re-

²⁵ These statistics are based on Ven. Kalukondayawe Prajnasekara, *Sinhala Puvvatpat Sangara Itihasaya*, Vols. 4 and 5. Colombo, 1968.

²⁶ For details see, K.D.P. Wickremasinghe, *Nutana Sinhala Sahitayaya* Colombo, 1965, pp. 9-54.

²⁷ See E. R. Sarathchandra, *The Sinhalese*. Colombo, 1950, pp. 65-77.

²⁸ *op. cit.*, p. 78 ff.

²⁹ Translated from the Introduction to *Sucaritadarsaya*, Colombo, 1926.

awakening of the national consciousness is in no small measure due to the influence of his writings".³⁰

As Sirisena in the field of the novel so was John de Silva in the field of drama. In the introduction to the printed version of the play "Sri Vikrama Rajasimha Caritaya" (The story of the last king of Ceylon), he claims that the main aims of his plays was "to propagate once again the Sinhalese music that has gone into abeyance, to depict the ancient customs, dress, ornaments etc., to censure the evil habits among our people today, to re-create the Sinhalese national awareness that was there of yore and to foster a love for the Sinhalese language among the younger generation who now find it distasteful".³¹ De Silva wrote and produced a large number of plays centered on themes drawn from Buddhist literature and the history of the Sinhalese. The most notable among them are, *Sri Sangabo* (1903), *Sri Vikrama Rajasimha* (1906), *Valagamba* (1907), *Dutugamunu* (1910), *Mahanama* (1913), *Alakesvara* (1913), *Devanampiyatissa* (1914), *Vessantara* (1916), *Vihara Maha Devi* (1916), *Parangi Hatane* (1917), and *Keppetipola* (1917). The last but one had as its theme the struggle of the Sinhalese against the Portuguese and the last depicted the story of the most prominent Sinhalese general in the rebellion of 1818 against the British.

To ensure that his message was brought home to the audience De Silva was in the habit of making a speech during the interval of the performance.³² It is said that during the premiere of *Sri Vikrama Rajasimha* — the story of the last king of Ceylon — when the scene of the king's capitulation to the British was being performed the audience proceeded to clap hands and de Silva immediately ordered the curtain to be dropped and appeared on the stage to say:

"Alas gentlemen, this is not an occasion for us to cheer like fools. This is an occasion of national sorrow, and we must derive from it a message to protect our land, our nation and our religion."³³

The manner in which dramatic art was utilized during the early decades of the twentieth century for the purpose of re-awakening national consciousness is evinced in the works of other leading playwrights

³⁰ E.R. Sarathchandra, *Modern Sinhalese Fiction*, Colombo, 1943, p. 64.

³¹ Translated from the Introduction to *Sri Vikrama Rajasinghe Caritaya* Colombo, 1906.

³² L.D.A. Ratnayaka, *Nittigna John De Silva Nataka Itihasaya*, Colombo, 1963, p. 103.

³³ *op. cit.*, p. 217.

of the day such as Charles Dias, U.D.P. Abeysekera and D. V. Seneviratne.³⁴

Thus the vogue of the day was art with a purpose — the purpose being the fostering of a religio-national fervour among the people.

The Emergence of the Sinhalese Language as a Symbol and a Cause

During the first two decades of the twentieth century nationalist agitation had reached a point where the demand came to be *swarajyaya* — self-government. The elite leadership had found the key to successful politics — political organizations. Several such organizations, namely The Ceylon Reform Society, The Ceylon Reform League, Ceylon National Association and the Ceylon National Congress³⁵ had come into being. Moreover, the working class had emerged as a politically cogent factor and organized trade unionism had appeared on the scene.³⁶

Another important development during this period was the rift that appeared in the anti-colonial struggle. The apparent harmonious relations between the two major communities, Sinhalese and Tamil, which had existed during the early days of organized agitation came to an end with a crisis in the Ceylon National Congress in the early 20's. In the end the erstwhile broad-based national struggle was reduced to a 'communalist' concern. It was now more or less a matter of how much each community could coax or wrangle out of the colonial master.³⁷

As far as the Sinhalese community was concerned this situation could not have been something unexpected. For this was only the inevitable and appropriate climax to the religio-national resurgence of the preceding period. The only task that awaited it was the specified formulation of a cause befitting the new situation. This was accomplished by a movement called *Hela Hawla*, "The pure Sinhalese Fraternity" led by a charismatic leader named Cumaratunga.

³⁴ For details see, L.D.A. Ratnayaka, *Sangita Itihasaya*, Colombo, 1946, p. 103.

³⁵ For details see, Calvin A. Woodward, *The Growth of Party System in Ceylon*, Brown Univ. Press, Providence, 1969, pp. 25-32.

³⁶ See V. K. Jayawardene, *The Rise of the Labour Movement in Ceylon*, p. 72 ff.

³⁷ For details of this development see W. Howard Wriggins, *Ceylon: The Dilemmas of a New Nation*, Princeton, N.J., 1960, pp. 80-90.

Munidasa Cumaratunga (1887-1944)³⁸ was the most outstanding figure in the Sinhalese cultural scene during the period extending from the 1920's to the '40's. His public career which begins in the early twenties and ends with his death in 1944 was devoted to the mission of reestablishing and propagating what he deemed to be "the genuine Sinhalese language", or as he called it — *Helese*.³⁹

According to Cumaratunga the "genuine Sinhalese" culture has a history extending back into a remoter antiquity than that depicted in the extant historiographical works such as *The Mahavamsa*. The land of the "genuine Sinhalese" or *Helese* was much larger, extending up to Madagascar and it was ruled by mighty emperors whose dominions sometimes reached as far as Greece. It was of such a great civilization that the *Helese* language, a language "older than the oldest of Indian languages",⁴⁰ formed the medium of communication. This great civilization was subsequently destroyed due to the treachery of "Helese traitors" who deserted to the side of the Indian enemies in the war depicted in *The Ramayana*.⁴¹ Consequently Indian influences swept over the *Helese* culture "debasing" and "corrupting", among other things, its language.⁴²

Cumaratunga believed that language was the most important aspect of a nation's culture. "Vulgarization" in language, according to him, was connected with the decline of the nation. Thus, he argued that in order to uplift a nation in decline, its language must first be "purified" of all "vulgarizations" and "debasements".⁴³

³⁸ In the course of his career he changed his name which was originally Munidasa Cumaratunga to Munidasa Cumaratunga, Cumaratunga Munidasa and Cumaratunga Munidas. Each change was an attempt to make his name tally with the "genuine Sinhalese" tradition which he sought to resuscitate. He is best known as Munidasa Cumaratunga.

³⁹ The career of Cumaratunga is discussed in detail in K.N. Dharmadasa, "The career of Munidasa Cumaratunga: Its socio-political significance", *Ceylon Studies Seminar*, 1973 series, no. 11.

⁴⁰ Cumaratunga made this declaration answering a query by one of the readers in *The Helio* — the English periodical of which he was the editor. Vol. I, nos. 11 and 12 (1941), p. 87.

⁴¹ This epic, Cumaratunga observed, written by the Indians depicts Vibhisana who deserted to the Indian side as a hero, and Ravana the Emperor of the *Helese* as a demon.

⁴² Cumaratunga's views on the history of Ceylon are found scattered in his numerous writings. He has never presented them in the form of a coherent theory in any single work. The references are given in the paper cited in f.n. 39.

⁴³ For Cumaratunga's views on the importance of language in national upliftment see, K.N.O. Dharmadasa, *op. cit.*

On the development of modern Sinhalese literary idiom, Cumaratunga has made an unmistakable impression. He follows in the wake of scholars such as Ven. Ratmalane Sri Dharmarama (1853-1919) and Mudliyar W. F. Gunawardene (1861-1935) who during the previous generation had resuscitated a large number of features in the literary idiom which had fallen into disuse during the period of decline following the reign of King Parakramabahu VI (1415-1467) during the Kotte period.⁴⁴ The literary language upheld by Ven. Dharmarama and Mudliyar Gunawardens was the "mixed Sinhalese" form characterized by borrowings from Sanskrit and Pali. This was the accepted language of all prose writings of the period.⁴⁵ Cumaratunga, however, was to strike a different note. Having been himself a user of "mixed Sinhalese" in the early days of his career, he adopted subsequently an idiom characterized by the exclusive use of "pure Sinhalese" words, a more archaic grammar, and new coinages modelled on archaic rules of derivation. According to him this was the resuscitation of the "genuine Sinhalese" language which had fallen into disuse during the period of national decline.⁴⁶ Although in his "return" to the "genuine Sinhalese" language Cumaratunga was followed by a considerable section of the younger generation, the bulk of the Sinhalese literati considered it as unwarranted extremism.

The puristic zeal of Cumaratunga, however, had its impact on the literary idiom. The intense propaganda he carried on in the cause of the "good language" through treatises of grammar, school textbooks, literary compositions, editions of classics, a newspaper and two periodicals of which he was the editor⁴⁷ contributed to shift the literary language further towards the classical ideal.⁴⁸

As was mentioned above, the promotion of the "good language" was in his conception the pre-requisite of a national resurgence. In a society which was yearning to free itself from foreign rule he was able to arouse considerable response. Mobilizing those who agreed with

⁴⁴ This is generally regarded as the end of the classical period of Sinhalese literature. See, Ven. Nivadama Dharmakirti, *Sinhala Sahityaye Swarna Yugaya*, Kelaniya, 1952.

⁴⁵ The development of modern Sinhalese literary idiom has been a story of consistent archaization. See M. W. Sugathapala de Silva, "Effects of Purism on the Development of the Written Language: The Case History of the Sinhalese", *Linguistics*, 36, Mouton, The Hague, 1967, pp. 5-17.

⁴⁶ For details see, K.N.O. Dharmadasa, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ For details see, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ For details see, *op. cit.*

his views he inaugurated in 1941 at Panadura the organization called *Hela Hawla*, "the pure Sinhalese Fraternity". The membership of the *Hela Hawla* consisted largely of the Sinhalese educated youth, especially Sinhalese school-masters and Buddhist monks. Soon branch organizations sprouted in a number of towns.⁴⁹

In its ideology the *Hela* movement was critical of the policies of the colonial government as well as the Establishment in the national leadership. Cumaratunga charged the Department of Education with the contrivance of a system of education designed to produce individuals with a servile mentality. "The Department has done and are (sic) still doing everything to make the language lawless, graceless, powerless and worthless", he said. "Language without dignity produces men and women without dignity. Men and women without dignity are as base as beasts and can be made to stoop to any meanness."⁵⁰

Contrary to the belief of some western-educated national leaders Cumaratunga did not expect the colonial master to prepare the country gradually towards self-government. According to him it was "a thought no sane person could harbour".⁵¹ Instead therefore of living in the expectation of grace from the higher powers he exhorted the Sinhalese literati, and the school-teachers in particular, to lead the way in developing a feeling "among ourselves that we can manage our own affairs"⁵²

For the delay in the growth of such a feeling of self-confidence, he blamed the established national leadership. "They (i.e. the British would have given us freedom long ago", he said, "had it not been for the treacherous conduct of some of our own leaders".⁵³ These leaders were the target of constant attack in the two organs of the *Hela Hawla* — *Subasa* and *The Helio*. The scholar monks and the university teachers came under severe criticism for their linguistic policy. "The pundits of the temple and the Universtiy", wrote Cumaratunga, "have created a language of their own which is at once debased, insipid and inelegant".⁵⁴ And the national political leadership was blamed for conniving

⁴⁹ For details see, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ *The Helio*, Vol. I, nos. 9 and 10, 1941, p. 70.

⁵¹ "Lankave Adhyapanaya" — an article which originally appeared in 1934 in the newspapers *Lak Mini Pahana* of which he was the editor. (Reproduced in *Hela Heliya*, a collection of writings and speeches of Cumaratunga, No. 1, Colombo, 1961, pp. 14-18.)

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *The Helio*, Vol. I, nos. 15 and 16, 1941, p. 125.

⁵⁴ *The Helio*, Vol. I, nos. 13 and 14, 1941, p. 105.

with them.⁵⁵ Thus in the view of Cumaratunga the colonial government and the national leadership — both political and cultural — were equally responsible for the perpetration of the “lawless, graceless etc. etc.” state of language which was at the base of the servile condition of the nation.

In this connection he considered as highly deplorable the attitude of the national political leadership which had by this time gained enough control over the affairs of government to be able to bring about a change of policy if it so desired.⁵⁶ Time and again he castigated these Western-educated elite for their indifference towards Sinhalese.⁵⁷

This head-on clash with the power elite of Sinhalese society prevented the *Helese* ideology from being acceptable to society at large. However, the impact of the movement was strong and contributed much in moulding the shape of events that were to follow. The near-fanatic emphasis given to language seems to have created an unprecedented language awareness, especially among the Sinhalese educated youth. Moreover in an era where the English-educated enjoyed socio-economic superiority, the battle cry of “Sinhalese, more Sinhalese and better Sinhalese”.⁵⁸ and the psychologically satisfying novel theories of history would have instilled a feeling of confidence and self-esteem into the minds of the Sinhalese literati. As this coincided with the obtaining of universal adult franchise (1931) and the subsequent dawn of political independence (1948), the net result of the *Hela* provocation was the genesis from among the Sinhalese literati of a movement to turn the tables in their own favour. This class comprised largely of Sinhalese school-teachers and Buddhist monks was at the forefront of the “revolution” of 1956, which Cumaratunga did not live to see.⁵⁹

Again, the emergence of the Sinhalese language as a political weapon may be traced to the career of Cumaratunga. He had urged as far back as 1922 the necessity of using Sinhalese in the affairs of government.⁶⁰ Subsequently in 1941, ten years after the adoption of

⁵⁵ See his criticism of personalities such as Sir D. B. Jayatilleke and Professor Malalasekara, discussed in K.N.O. Dharmadasa, *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ Under the Donoughmore Constitution which came into effect in 1931, there was a large degree of internal self-government.

⁵⁷ For details see K.N.O. Dharmadasa, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ This was the slogan of *The Helio*, the English medium periodical of the *Hela Havla*, edited by Cumaratunga.

⁵⁹ For the role played by the Sinhalese literati in the “revolution” of 1956, see W. Howard Wriggins, *op. cit.*, p. 337 ff.

⁶⁰ See *Hela Heliya*, 1, p. 113.

universal adult franchise, he proposed "At the next elections let us adopt a new policy. Let us say beforehand, 'we shall not vote for a person who does not promise to speak exclusively in Sinhalese in the Council'".⁶¹ Thus the *Hela* movement may be considered in many ways as the forerunner of the events that were to occur in the 1950's.

The Religio-Nationalism of the Post-Independence Era

The transition from colonial status to self-government was accomplished peacefully in 1948 as a result of political bargaining by the Western-educated elite who comprised the national leadership. The preceding decades had witnessed, however, at mass level, a strong wave of nationalist feeling aroused in striving towards independence. A constant theme found in the literature of the period was the exhortation of the Sinhalese to follow the example of the past. Thus, for example, Ven. S. Mahinda wrote in his *Nidahase Mantraya* "Incantation of Freedom".

"Behold the scene in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruva, think of the freedom that existed then, raise more and more your youthful vociferation. Come! Let us onward! Rise! Do not fall asleep!"

By such appeals to nostalgic nationalism the Sinhalese came to be aroused to a consciousness of ethnic superiority. Moreover, the national self-image was as a "chosen people" — entrusted with the task of preserving the Buddhist doctrine in its pristine purity. *The Mahavamsa* reports that the Buddha lying on his death-bed addressed Sakka — the king of the gods — and said, "In Lanka, O Lord of gods, will my religion be established".⁶² Based on this statement an ideological basis for religio-nationalism, which viewed the island as the *dharmadvīpa* — "the land of the Buddhist doctrine", was evolved through the centuries.⁶³

As was mentioned above the Sinhalese-Buddhist revivalism of the 19th century arose as a reaction against the rising tide of westernization in general and Christian expansionism in particular. In view of the reverses of fortune undergone by the Sinhalese Buddhists under the yoke of foreign rule, the attainment of independence was viewed as an opportunity for restoration and restitution.

Firstly, there were the grievances and fears of the Sinhalese ethnic group. It was believed that the Sinhalese language was pushed aside

⁶¹ *Subasa*, iii, 7 and 8, 1941, p. 35.

⁶² See Kitsiri Malalgoda, *op. cit.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

under the colonial regime and English enthroned. As social and economic advancement was linked to the knowledge of English, it was feared by some that eventually the Sinhalese people would forget their language. A notable theme in the revivalist literature was the exhortation addressed to the Sinhalese to cherish their valuable linguistic heritage.⁶⁴ The attainment of independence in 1948, however, did not bring forth a turning of tables as was expected. The attitude adopted by the English educated elite who held the reins of power was one of proceeding "slowly, slowly" in the fulfilment of these nationalist demands.⁶⁵

Secondly, there was a deep seated sense of injury among the Buddhists. They felt that tremendous damage had been caused to the interests of Buddhism for over a period of four hundred years, particularly in the maritime provinces. The attainment of political independence was therefore viewed as the opportunity to redress Buddhist grievances. The issue was connected to the concept of democracy and to the cultural tradition that existed prior to European rule. "The Buddhists who form two thirds of the population of Ceylon", said Professor G. P. Malalasekera, president of the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, "are clamouring for their rightful status. Therefore what is asked for from the present government is to help to preserve the rights of the Buddhist populace".⁶⁶ "Rightful status" was conceived as the extension of government "protection" to Buddhist places of worship, and the granting of government assistance to Buddhist religious activities — a practice discontinued due to "pressure from the missionaries".⁶⁷ Again, the attitude of the government to these demands was one of caution and as far as possible non-interference in religious affairs.⁶⁸

At a time when the failure to move the government towards fulfilling these "legitimate" demands was causing considerable unease there came an event of unique religio-national significance which was to stir up the latent nativistic forces that had been gathering momentum during the preceding decades. This was the *Buddha Jayanti*

⁶⁴ For example see the references above to Piyadasa Sirisena and John de Silva.

⁶⁵ "hemin, hemin" (slowly, slowly) were the words attributed to the first Prime Minister of independent Ceylon, D.S. Senanayake, when he replied to a delegation of these interests.

⁶⁶ Addressing its 32nd anniversary meeting on Dec. 17, 1950. See K.H.M. Sumatipala, *Bodu Samulu Puranaya*, Colombo, 1968, p. 75.

⁶⁷ K.H.M. Sumatipala, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

— the 2500th anniversary commemoration of the passing away of the Buddha, of the founding of the Sinhalese race and the commencement of the history of the island.⁶⁹ Great enthusiasm was generated in preparation for the occasion, lavishly aided by the government which established a special department to organize the commemoration.

The expectations linked with the commemoration were explicitly millennial. According to tradition there was to be after the event, an unprecedented efflorescence of the Buddhist religion and the dawn of the golden age of the Sinhalese race under a king (sic) named *Diyasena*.

In the climate of religio-national enthusiasm generated during the *Jayanti* period the cause of Buddhism and Sinhalese emerged as a political issue. The ruling United National Party (U.N.P.) which had not shown much concern about the demands of the Sinhalese-Buddhist lobby was represented as “anti-national” and “anti-religious”.⁷⁰ A coalition group of opposition parties under the name *Mahajana Eksath Peramuna* (M.E.P.) “The People’s United Front” emerged at the time under the leadership of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. It espoused the cause of the Sinhalese Buddhists and promised to make Sinhalese the national language “within twenty four hours” as well as to remedy “the injustices done to Buddhism.”⁷¹

The national language issue and the Buddhist demand were both characterized by nativistic overtones. When the national language issue was first brought up in the legislature during the thirties and the early forties there was a tacit understanding that equal status should be given to Sinhalese and Tamil. Tamil is the language of 11 per cent of the population — the largest minority group whose elite had played a very significant role in the independence struggle.⁷² In the 1950’s, however, the problem took on a different colouring altogether. It was posed as *either* “Sinhalese only” *or* “Parity of status for Sinhalese and

⁶⁹ The date was the full-moon day of the month of *Wesak* (falling in May) in the year 1956. For details of the significance of the *Buddha Jayanti* see, D.C. Wijayawardhana, *The Revolt in the Temple*, Colombo, 1953, 3.

⁷⁰ The reference being to “The Sinhalese Nation” and “the Buddhist Religion”.

⁷¹ “Within twenty-four hours” are the word of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, the leader of the M.E.P. The policy statement on Buddhism is in the Manifesto of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the main constituent of the M.E.P., of which Bandaranaike was the founder president. See, I.D.S. Weerawardene, *Ceylon General Elections*, 1956, Colombo, 1960, p. 58.

⁷² See for example, the debates on resolutions concerning the official language reported in *Debates of the State Council of Ceylon*, 1939, columns 450-456; 1944, columns 745-770 and 806-816.

Tamil". The latter proposition was viewed by the Sinhalese as a potential threat to the very existence of the Sinhalese linguistic community. For, it was feared that in the event of granting parity of status to both languages, Tamil with its tremendous resources in South India, a few miles across the Palk Straits, would eventually emerge as the only language of the island, squeezing out Sinhalese which existed only in Ceylon. This "minority complex" of the Sinhalese majority⁷³ made the demand for "Sinhalese only" reach near-hysterical proportions.

A similar trend of thought was evinced in the Buddhist lobby. The All Ceylon Buddhist Congress (A.C.B.C.), a powerful organization of urban middle class Buddhists, compiled in 1956 a report containing a detailed list of the reverses of fortune undergone by the Buddhists during the period of Western domination, and the propositions by which it sought to redress these "just" grievances and to "restore" to Buddhism its "rightful status".⁷⁴ Fears of missionary expansion and the subversive activities of a movement called Catholic Action were expressed constantly by some leaders of the A.C.B.C.⁷⁵ The A.C.B.C. put forward forty one demands on the eve of the general elections of 1956 and they were approved by the M.E. P.⁷⁶

At the elections, the M.E.P. was swept into power with a large majority as the champion of the Sinhalese Buddhist cause. It was conceived as a victory for the so far disadvantaged majority. Language and religion were the overt symbols through which the grievances of this majority, which had been awakened to an awareness of its rights and its strength, were expressed.⁷⁷

Later, the aftermath of 1956 has seen the fulfilment, one by one, of the aspirations of this post-independence wave of resurgent Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism. Sinhalese has been made the "only" official

⁷³ See B.H. Farmer, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 24, 3, 1965, pp. 431-439.

⁷⁴ See *The Betrayal of Buddhism: An Abridged version of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry*, Colombo, 1956.

⁷⁵ See I.D.S. Weerawardene, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-114; 132-133; 146-149 and *Catholic Action*, published by The Bauddha Jatika Balavegaya, Colombo, 1963.

⁷⁶ See K.H.M. Sumatipala, *Bodu Samulu Puranaya*, p. 114.

⁷⁷ See Michael Roberts, "The political antecedents of the Revivalist Elite within the M.E.P. Coalition of 1956", *Ceylon Studies Seminar 1969/70 Series*, no. 11.

language of Ceylon.⁷⁸ And more than ninety per cent of the demands of the A.C.B.C. have been conceded up to date by the different governments that came into office. A large number of these demands were granted by the governments of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike (1956-1959), and Sirimavo Bandaranaike (1960-65). Even the U.N.P. government which followed (1965-1970) had to keep in step, as was evident when it established the *poya* (the Buddhist religious day) holidays instead of Sundays.⁷⁹ The 1970 government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike has, in the new Constitution adopted in 1972, given Buddhism "The foremost place" and accepted that "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."⁸⁰

The concept of "protection" which may be traced to the nativistic ideologies inherent in the revivalist endeavours of the preceding era, is markedly apparent in the activities of the Department of Cultural Affairs" — founded by the M.E.P. government of 1956 and continued since then by subsequent governments. Its activities cover the fields of religion, literature, arts and crafts. The review of activities of this Department during the first three years of its existence shows that its sole concern almost has been to cater to the demands of the Sinhalese-Buddhist lobby.⁸¹

The enthusiasm generated by the resurgent activities of the 50's resulted in a general efflorescence of the arts. In keeping with the main trends in society the vogue of the day was a romantic archaism. This was certainly one of the elements constituting the appeal of *Maname*, a very influential innovation in drama, which revived the forms and a theme of the traditional folk-opera to express a contemporary vision. In painting and sculpture the *Jatika Kala Peramuna* "The National Arts Front", followed the policy of reviving traditional techniques with much propaganda against the Western styles followed by leading artists of the day such as George Keyt, Justin Deraniyagala and

⁷⁸ By the *Official Language Bill*, presented to Parliament on 1956.06.05 and passed on the 14th of the same month. For details see *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 24, session 1956-57, columns 736-1939.

⁷⁹ See *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 60, 1965-66, col. 1509 and K.H.M. Sumatipala, *op. cit.*

⁸⁰ *The Constitution of Sri Lanka (Ceylon)*, Colombo, 1972, p. 4.

⁸¹ See *Ceylon Year Book*, pp. 214-216.

J.D.A. Perera who belonged to the English educated elite.⁸² In poetry there arose a romantic interest in folk compositions which had so far remained ignored by the Sinhalese literati. Leading literary artists such as Martin Wickramasinghe and G.B. Senanayake made comparisons between the compositions of the folk poets and those of the classical learned poets to illustrate the imitative drabness of the latter and the creative freshness of the former.⁸³ In music the search for genuine Sinhalese tradition, in place of the Indian classical tradition borrowed in the recent past, had already begun in the early 40's.⁸⁴ This attempt which did not receive much attention at the time, however, received a boost during the post '56 period. Renderings of folk music have become popular over the radio⁸⁵ and in the school curriculum where music is a subject, the tendency is to replace Indian classical music by a modernized form of folk music.⁸⁶

The resuscitatory zeal has had its impact on the linguistic affairs of the community as well. The "preservation" and "conservation" endeavours of Munidasa Cumaratunga and others⁸⁷ during the pre-independence era had found some respite during the early years of independence. Some leading writers of this time were even bold enough to suggest the abandonment of the accepted literary language based on archaic usage and the adoption, in its place, of the equivalent of the spoken form.⁸⁸ For example, Ven. Yakkaduwe Prajnarama, one of the leading most recognized scholar monks of the day adopted this attitude in his *Vanaḱata*⁸⁹ and he was supported by Martin Wickra-

⁸² For the art of George Keyt and others, see Len Vangeyzel, "Contemporary Painting in Ceylon", *Souvenir Catalogue, International Exhibition of Paintings, Colombo Exhibition*, Colombo 1952, pp. 27-38 and for the views of the Jatika Kala Peramuna see, Piyal Wickramasinghe, "Jatika Kalave Unnatiya", *Rasavahini*, I, 4, 1956, pp. 53-54.

⁸³ See, Martin Wickramasinghe, *Sahitya Kalava, Mount Lavinia*, 1950, pp. 69-70 and *passim*; G. B. Senanayake, *Vicara Pravesaya*, Colombo 1954, Ch. v, and *passim*.

⁸⁴ By Cumaratunga Munidasa. See his *Hela Miiyasiya*, Colombo, 1941.

⁸⁵ For examples, the *Jayagaayana* of the leading singer, W.D. Amara-deva.

⁸⁶ Under the guidance of the Director in charge of Music Education, W. B. Makuloulouwa who believes that "the genuine Sinhalese music is found in the village". (See his *Hela Gii Maga*, Maharagama, 1962, p. 2.

⁸⁷ For details see K.N.O. Dharmadasa, *op. cit.*

⁸⁸ The details of these controversies have been dealt with in K.N.O. Dharmadasa, *Spoken and Written Sinhalese: A Contrastive Study*, M. Phil. dissertation, York, 1968 (unpublished) pp. 25-39.

⁸⁹ A collection of stories published in Kelaniya, 1948.

masinghe who is acclaimed as one of the leading figures in the Sinhalese literary world.⁹⁰ However, this movement was soon to be overwhelmed by the nativistic upsurge of the mid-fifties and traditionalism was to triumph eventually as was evinced in the controversies over the school text books and the *Sammata Sinhala*, "standard Sinhalese", of the sixties.⁹¹

⁹⁰ See his *Sahitya Kalava*, pp. 34-35.

⁹¹ These controversial issues are discussed in K.N.O. Dharmadasa, *Bhasava ha Samajaya*, Colombo 1972, pp. 121-126.