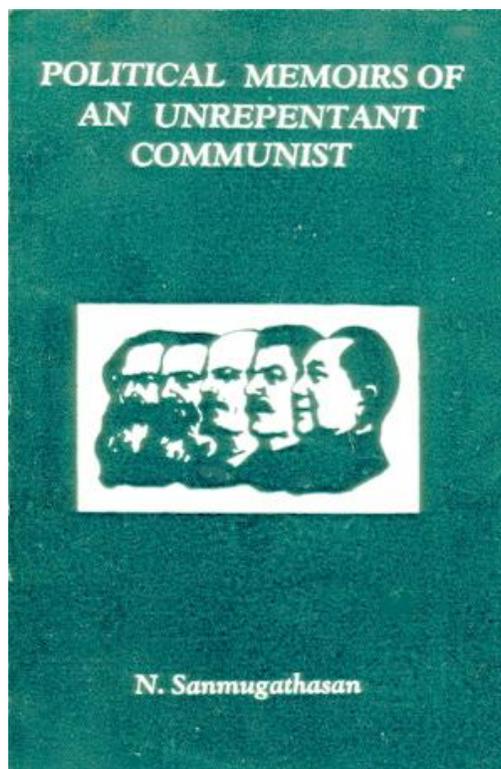


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Political Memoirs of an Unrepentant Communist

by N. Sanmugathan



(1989: 301 pages)

Sanmugathan - Political Memoirs of an Unrepentant Communist

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About the Author

N Sanmugathasan became a full time worker at the Ceylon Communist Party ever since he graduated from the University Ceylon in 1943. In 1963 during the ideological debate inside the international communist movement he spearheaded the fight for Marxism - Leninism - Mao Tse tung Thought in the old party and played a leading role in the founding of the Marxist Leninist Communist Party of which he was late elected general secretary. He is also general secretary of the Ceylon Trade Union Federation and has taken part in most of the trade union struggles of his day. His political life has run on parallel lines with the left movement. As such these memoirs are a virtual history of the left movement. Sanmugathasan is widely travelled and has written a number of political books. He is 70 years now.

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A number of my friends have been at me for a number of years to write the story of my political life because it has, in the main, coincided with the rise and development of the left movement in Sri Lanka. One of the most persistent was A. Sivanandan, Director of the institute of Race Relations, London and the editor of "Race And Class". This book might not have seen the light of day if not for them.

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[From Chapter 1: Life in the University]

It was my second year at the University, 1939 - 40, that changed the direction of my entire life. In that year I became a communist. I have not looked back ever since.

I had finished my secondary school education at the Manipay Hindu college which was only half a mile from my home in Manipay, Jaffna. When I had passed the senior Cambridge examination, with exemption for the London Matriculation examination, I was entitled to join the University College. But, there was an age limit of 17 and I was under-aged by three days. So, I joined St. Joseph's college, Colombo and marked time for one year. I joined the University College, as it was then known, in 1938 - 1939. Mine was the last batch of students to join the University College without an entrance examination.

In my second year, having been successful in my Intermediate - in - Arts examination, I enrolled to study History. At the same time, I persuaded my father to let me join the Union Hostel. There were, then three Hostels for men and one for women. The Union Hostel, catering mainly for Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims, consisted of Arunachalam Hall and Jayatileka Hall. Both halls were situated at Guildford Crescent, within easy walking distance of the University college. The Catholics had their Catholic hostel at the top of Havelock Road while the Protestants had Brodie Hostel in Horton place.

The time that one spends at the University is perhaps the best part of one's life. For the first time, there is a sense of freedom, free from all parental restraints. There is the keenness to study and get on, and the feeling that the frontiers of knowledge are opening before you. There is also keen intellectual competition because the University students, after all, are the elite produced by the best schools in the island. It was also a challenge for students like me, who had come from less advanced schools in the provinces, to face up to competition with the products of schools such as Royal, St. Thomas, Ananda etc., and to perhaps better them in some fields.

More than anything else, there was the leisure to read and study-with, perhaps, the best library at our disposal. Most of the Marxism-Leninism I learnt was during my University days. This was due to the fact that I had been educated in English which was the language of the British colonialists. Every bad thing has also a good side. It was a definite advantage to have been educated in English since today English is perhaps the most important international language. This is the reason why many students of my generation found it easy to secure good jobs in the international civil service. A good knowledge of English and the ability to speak it well was their passport.

But, this is no longer the case today. Those students who have come to the university, particularly during the last two decades, did not know their English. Since Marxist-Leninist literature in Sinhala and Tamil was few, even those aspiring to study Marxism-Leninism could not study Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin or Mao Tsetung, most of whose works were available in English. They had to go behind English educated intellectuals for their versions of Marxism-Leninism.

When I first joined the Union Hostel a person used to bring left books for sale on Sundays. That was how I came to read John Strachey's "why you should be a socialist". Despite the fact that the author later became a renegade, the book was an excellent exposition of the principles of socialism. It was the book that converted me. My conversion was strictly intellectual.

My political development was speeded up by the arrival of three Communists who had finished their University education at Cambridge, They were Pieter Keuneman, A Vaidialingam and P. Kandiah. The last two had won government scholarships to Cambridge while Keuneman had been sent there by his father, who was a judge of the Supreme Court.

During the decade preceding the second world war, Cambridge University had been in a great intellectual ferment as a result of the international campaign to stop fascism and Hitler. The intellectuals were drawn to the communists who were leading this campaign. The Spanish civil war had stirred the hearts of many radical intellectuals who had volunteered to join the respective International Brigades of their countries to fight in Spain against Franco. Many British intellectuals, like Ralph Fox, fought and died in Spain.

it was in this context of anti-fascism that these students from Ceylon became communists and joined the Communist Party of Great Britain. Their apprenticeship in the British Communist Party was unfortunately to affect the Ceylon Communist Party which they were to help form.

But, more of it later. At that time graduates returning from Cambridge or Oxford were looked up to with great respect. We hung on their every word. Kandiah became. the sub-warden of our hostel and a visiting lecturer at the University College. Naturally, I was thrown a lot in to his company. My Marxist-Leninist education developed.

At this time, the LSSP had not yet split. Neither had I joined the LSSP organisationally. I only remember going with Dr. N. M. Perera in his car to address a student meeting in a school at Kalutara. I also remember being asked by one of the LSSP student leaders at the University College, Dicky Attygalle, to propose an anti-imperialist resolution in the college union society.

I have always remembered this incident because of the reason he gave me as to why he could not move it himself. He told me that his brother was a senior officer in the C. I. D. and that his brother could get in to trouble if he identified himself openly with left politics. I had no respect for this kind of intellectual who wanted to remain safe while getting others to pull the chestnuts out of the fire. Apart from these I had no organisational contact with the LSSP. The split in the LSSP came during December - January of that year. I will deal with this split later.

But, perhaps, the most important event of that year was most the outbreak of the second World War in September 1939. I remember that on this day I had gone for a matinee show at the Regal theatre which, ironically, was showing the film "The Sun Never Sets on the British Empire". When I came out of the cinema I saw the newspaper headlines which announced the outbreak of the second world war which was to lead to the sun setting on this once mighty Empire. That war was to change everything and everybody beyond recognition.

I remember that, at the University College, we put out a leaflet against the war which was then in

its imperialist stage. Professor S.A. Pakeman was the acting principal, having succeeded Professor R. Marrs who had been a stern disciplinarian. Pakeman was angered by our anti-imperialist protest. He immediately suspended three of us for being associated with the distribution of the leaflet. The three were Esmond Wickramasingha, son of civil servant and Land Commissioner, C. L. Wickramasingha, Arabi Saravanamuthu, son of Dr. R. Saravanamuthu, former mayor of Colombo and former M. P, for Colombo North and myself. It was fortunate that the other two came from rather well to do and influential families. Otherwise, I doubt whether I would ever have been reinstated.

I remember Esmond taking us to the residence of D. S. Senanayake to seek his intervention. We also sought the intervention of Professor C. Suntheralingam who had hitherto always championed the students. But he was by now a changed man. He had set his eyes on becoming the principal of the University College and was therefore intent to see that discipline was observed. Ultimately some compromise was arrived at and all three of us were reinstated.

This incident had an effect. That was to bring me to the attention of the students. I became known. As a result, my friends suggested that I contest the post of General Secretary of the University Union Society.

This was the society which embraced all sections of the students. It conducted fortnightly meetings, organised debates, published an annual magazine and generally looked after student affairs. To be President of the Union Society was, at that time, a prestigious matter.

When I contested the post of general secretary in 1940, Esmond Wickramasinghe contested as President. Both of us won. Esmond was then the leader of the LSSP group at the university. His subsequent going over to the UNP and becoming one its high priests is now history.

I led the communist group. These were the only two political factions at the University then. We were bitterly opposed to each other. But at the time about which I am speaking now, the effect of the split in the LSSP, which had only recently taken place, had not yet been felt.

In the subsequent year, I contested the post of President of the Union Society. My contestants were Rev. Walpole Rahula who was later to be appointed by the UNP as Vice Chancellor of the Vidyodaya University. At that time he fought the election on the ticket of the LSSP. My other contestant was Mr. Tisaveerasingham who represented the non-political crowd. I won an absolute majority over both.

An interesting incident took place on the day I won the election as President. The newly elected office bearers were expected to treat as many students as turned up. One of the Colombo Theatres was usually booked for the 9.30 p.m. show exclusively for us. That day we had booked the Empire Theatre.

The students usually went to the cinema in a procession, Dr. Ivor Jennings had just then arrived and been appointed as Principal of the University College. I approached him and asked for permission to take out a procession from the University College to the Empire theatre. At that time there was no need to get police permission for processions. Jennings refused. I decided not

to join the procession personally and instead to go direct to the theatre. We asked the students, who were then assembled at the University College, to go by themselves to the theatre. The inevitable happened as would happen when a large body of tipsy students went on the road.

Unfortunately, they had to pass Ladies College which was in Flower Road. Miss Opine was its principal. As her ill luck would have it, she drove into Ladies College as the procession was passing the gates. I did not know what exactly happened. But she must have been humiliated. She rushed inside and phoned the police, Police tried to chase the students. But the latter managed to get inside the theatre before the police could reach them. There was nothing that the police could do.

On the next Monday morning I was called up before Jennings. He demanded that I should take responsibility for what happened. He wanted me to trace the students who were responsible. I flatly denied that I could hold myself responsible for whatever might have happened. I gently reminded him that was precisely the reason why I had requested him to grant me permission to take out the procession. I told him that if he had granted me that permission I would have held myself responsible for anything that happened during the procession. Since he didn't I told him that I failed to see how he could hold me responsible. Jennings could not shake me from that position.

An indication of my nationalism and also, perhaps, the influence on me of the Indian national Independence movement which was then at its height that I presided over union meetings not only in the national dress but that the dress was made of khaddar. I was the first president to have done so. It must be remembered that this was long before S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike popularised the national dress.

At the same time as I was elected President of the University Union Society, I also became President of the Union Hostel Society. In this Society, the Office bearers held office only for a term. To be President during the first term was most coveted because it was at the end of this term that the annual dinner was held. It used to be presided over by the President. I can never forget the dinner over which I presided at that term.

Unlike the other hostels, the Union Hostel treated the annual dinner as a serious affair. No women or wine were permitted. It was the tradition for the President to make a speech on a serious topical subject while proposing the toast of Mother Lanka. But this toast had to be preceded by the so-called loyal toasts one to His Majesty, the King and another to his Excellency, the Governor. This was the set standard practice.

During my Presidential term, we decided to abolish the loyal toasts. We duly informed the Hostel Warden who informed Jennings. The latter replied by refusing the invitation to attend the dinner. This upset us because we wanted Jennings to be present. We were then in the midst of a heated campaign against a unitary residential University whose foremost champion was Jennings. We wanted him to hear our views which would have been expressed in the presidential speech. So we decided on a stratagem.

We decided to have the loyal toasts, Jennings now accepted our invitation. Professor C.

Suntheralingam was our chief guest. He had been a popular warden of Union Hostel for a long time. But he had resigned from that position due to some differences and had sworn not to come back to the hostel for 5 years. I had him on my left and Jennings on my right. I also remember that among the other guests who attended that dinner and spoke on that day were J. R. Jayawardene and Pieter Keuneman.

At the end of the dinner it was my task to propose the loyal toasts. I solemnly rose and, with a glass of aerated water, proposed the toast of His Majesty but did not drink it. The guests stood up but none of the students got up. It was a magnificent expression of anti-imperialist spirit. It was a slap in the face of Jennings. It would have been much better for him if he had accepted the deletion of the loyal toasts. The same thing happened with the toast to His Excellency the Governor. Then before proposing the toast of Mother Lanka, made a speech attacking Jennings' idea of a unitary residential University.

As I sat down, he told me that I had misunderstood him. He invited me to tea at the Galle Face Hotel, where he was staying, for a discussion the next day. I did go but neither of us convinced the other.

Among the memorable events that happened during my University days and one that stands out was the public rally at the Galle Face addressed by Pandit Nehru at the end of 1940. Nehru had come to Ceylon to discuss the Ceylon-Indian problem with the government of Ceylon. The talks failed but before he returned he addressed a mammoth rally at the Galle Face green. As an ardent nationalist and anti-imperialist, Nehru was then highly popular in Ceylon. I remember that Dr. Colvin R. de Silva translated Nehru's speech into Sinhalese. Some of A. E. Goonasinhe's thugs showed their resentment by trying to disrupt the meeting. In his usual impetuous style, Nehru tried to jump into the crowd to pacify it but was restrained. But order was soon restored.

Another notable incident was our holding of a student's conference. We had formed a student body that represented not only the students from the University College but also those from other leading schools. Through this organisation we had planned to hold a conference to discuss students' problems. We had obtained permission to use King George's Hall at the University College. But when we put up a notice about this conference on the union society notice board containing a message from Dr. S. A. Wickramasinge, Professor Pakman refused us the permission to use the Hall at the last minute. Undaunted, we set about making alternate preparations. The Colombo Town Hall was booked and the conference was successfully held.

The other notable event was something that failed to take place. In August 1942 took place the famous Quit India Movement. The Indian National movement drew a lot of support in Ceylon. The LSSP and the United Socialist Party, (predecessor of the Communist Party) organised a public meeting at the Gale Face green in support of the Quit India Movement. At the University College we decided to organise a demonstration from the college to the Galle Face Green. But, on the day of the meeting, the British Colonialist government banned both the LSSP and the USP as well as the public rally at the Galle Face Green. As a result our demonstration did not materialise.

But word about its preparation had gone to Jennings. He called up the then President of the

Union Society and asked him who was responsible for attempting to organise that demonstration. The President blurted out my name.

On the next day, Jennings crossed me while walking to College House. He asked me as to who had given me permission to organise a demonstration from the University College. I replied that the demonstration was to start on the public road opposite the College and that I did not need any body's permission to organise it. He got into a huff and went away threatening to report me to the Board of Residence and Discipline, He did carry out his threat and moved that I be dismissed from the University. The Board of Residence and Discipline then consisted of five members, including Jennings. Luckily for me, three of them refused to agree to Jennings's request. They were Professor A. W. Mailvaganam, who had been senior Treasurer of the Union Society and who knew me well personally, Professor Ginige who was my Hostel warden and Miss Mathiaperanam, Lecturer in Philosophy, who hailed from my village. So, I was saved. But I knew nothing of it till I had left the University.

The only other event to which I like to make a reference is the publication of Varsity News, a Weekly paper of 4 pages and priced at two cents which catered exclusively for University students. Later it broadened its scope by becoming the Students news. It was published by the Communist group at the University College though this was never stated openly. Of course the identity of the publishers was never in doubt. I still remember meeting Esmond Wickremasinghe a few days after the first issue came out. He told me, "this has to be either by you or me". I had to agree.

For the rest, my time was taken up by political activity on behalf of the party. We were then engaged in a bitter struggle with the Trotskyites of the LSSP. But I will deal with this in the next chapter. But I do remember one thing. By this time, Mountbatten had set up his SEAC (South East Asia Command) headquarters at Kandy and thousands of British troops as well as from the rest of the Empire were stationed in Ceylon. Among them were many communists, some of them very advanced. We used to invite these communists for discussions both at the Union Hostel and at the University College. Some of them also gave lectures. I remember that at Trincomalee, it was the financial aid from British communists in the Navy that helped our comrades there to open a branch office for the first time.

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[From Chapter VII - Bandaranaike Era]

The coming to power of Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, and his Mahajana Eksath Peramuna, a hotch - potch alliance represents a water-shed in the recent history of Sri Lanka. Although he is most associated with the introduction of the Sinhala Only language policy, it would be wrong to suggest that it was the only issue that affected the 1956 election results. No doubt, this issue cast its long shadow over the whole election.

But there were other issues. The loose united front that Bandaranaike had rigged up around his SLFP had as one of its constituents an organisation of young and radical Buddhist priests, called

the Eksath Bhikku Peramuna. Its members went all out and used the influence of the Sangha over the people, particularly in the rural areas to turn the scale in favour of the MEP. Never before or after in recent times had the Buddhist priesthood played such a decisive role in Ceylon politics. One of the key figures in this organisation, Buddharakitta was later to be found guilty and jailed (he died in jail) for being an accomplice in the assassination of Bandaranaike.

If Bandaranaike had learned from the mistakes of the UNP and trimmed his sails to suit the popular wind, he also walked away with some of the radical slogans which had been popularised by the left movement. Even the extremely radical demand for the nationalisation of foreign plantations found a place in his election programme. Of course it was never implemented. Immediately on coming to power, Bandaranaike virtually renounced this demand by announcing that it had been postponed for 10 years. Perhaps the slogan was never meant to be implemented. But the point is that this demand never re-appeared in any subsequent election programme - not even in the Common Programme, which was drafted by the SLFP in consultation with the LSSP and the Cotta Road revisionist clique!

Bandaranaike further emphasised his shift to the left by including in his United Front a splinter group from the LSSP, which was led by Philip Gunawardena, one of the founder members of the LSSP. He had also come to no-contest agreements with LSSP and the CP. I was one of the delegates from the CP who went for this discussion. The result was that, for the first time, the UNP was faced with a near-United Opposition and ended in complete rout. From their former position of 54 seats in Parliament; it was reduced to 8 seats. The MEP won 51 seats and polled 40.7 per cent of the votes. It was a landslide victory.

It has been claimed by some that the 1956 MEP victory was a sort of peaceful people's revolution. The claim is not merely an exaggeration. It is false. There was definitely a shift of power from the comprador bourgeoisie to the national bourgeoisie, from the western oriented, English-speaking, pro-imperialist minded section of the bourgeoisie to the national and anti-imperialist sections. But there was no revolution in the sense that the class structure of society was not disturbed. They both remained sections of the bourgeoisie, nor did the 1956 election victory in any way affect the strangle hold of foreign imperialism on the economy of the country. The same exploitation continued as formerly.

It is correct that several radical measures were carried out during the MEP regime. The bus service and Port of Colombo were nationalised. The Paddy Lands bill, a mildly agrarian reform law, was passed. British bases were evacuated from Trincomalee and Katunayake. Workers had greater freedom to strike. The Employees Provident Fund Bill became law. Diplomatic relations were established for the first- time with socialist countries. In foreign policy, Ceylon began to play what has been described as a non-aligned role. This meant that we did not always line up automatically with the imperialists as of old. But all these still do not add up to revolution - peaceful or otherwise.

In fact, what Bandaranaike did was to contain behind what he called his middle way policies the potentially dangerous anti-UNP current, to blunt its revolutionary edge and to divert it into the harmless channel of bourgeois parliamentary democracy.

His greatest influence was on the leadership of the Left movement. The desire to emulate the 1956 election victory of the MEP robbed the leadership of the LSSP and CP of whatever revolutionary pretences they might have had and converted them into faithful worshipers at the shrines of bourgeois parliamentary democracy. The further taming of the one - time revolutionaries was to be left to Bandaranaike's widow.

Looked at from this perspective, the claim of some commentators that Bandaranaike helped to avert violent revolution is not exaggerated.

When Mr. Bandaranaike's MEP Government came to power, the CP and the LSSP were in the opposition. But the CP was soon to change its position. This was partly a result of the advice given by the Chinese communist party.

Dr. S. A. Wickramasinghe, Pieter Keuneman and myself had gone to attend the 8th Congress of the Chinese communist party in September 1956. During the Congress, we had the opportunity of having a discussion with Liu Shao-shi, then at the height of his power inside the party but later to be condemned as a capitalist roader and to fall from power during the Cultural Revolution.

His revisionist views were apparent in the advice he gave to us to the effect that we should not oppose Bandaranaike or be too demanding and that we should give him time to carry out his policy. I was the only member of the delegation who disagreed with this point of view. But I was then theoretically ill equipped to pit myself against Liu Shao-chi whose views we assumed were those of the Chinese communist party.

Following this advice, the CP M.Ps in parliament disassociated themselves from the Opposition and thereafter functioned as an independent group – being neither with the government nor with the Opposition.

I must here say a few words about the 8th Congress of the Chinese Communist party itself. Being the first congress to be held after liberation (the 7th Congress had been held in Yenan) they made it an extravaganza. This was before the split in the international communist movement. Every communist party in the world had been invited and, all of them sent delegates. There were also representatives from illegal parties. It was a terrific show.

As the cars of the various delegations wended their way one behind the other to the conference hall, all traffic on the road was stopped to allow this huge procession of cars to go unimpeded. There were many bilateral discussions between the delegations from various parties. But there was no international gathering of all the parties at the same time.

The leaders of all the fraternal parties who attended the Congress were invited to address the conference. The ticklish question arose as to who should address on behalf of our party. I decided the question by proposing Dr. Wickramasinghe. During the Congress Dr. Wickramasinghe suffered his first heart attack and had to be hospitalised. At the end of the conference, a plane was put at our disposal in which Keuneman and I toured some of the most important cities of China along with interpreters and a body guard. Among the cities we visited were the northern port of Dairen, the beautiful resort of Hangshaw, the industrial city of

Shanghai and the southern capital of Catton from which we departed for home.

But the best proof that the election victory of 1956 did not solve any economic problem was that the MEP and its supporters had to rouse communal and language feelings among the Sinhalese to maintain their support. During the MEP regime occurred the worst communal holocaust that Ceylon had so far experienced.

Genesis of the Sinhala - Tamil Conflict

It is just as well, at this point to study the communal problem as it arose at that time.

One of the main reasons why the Tamils occupied a better place in the government service and the professions under British rule than the Sinhalese did was due to the head start they had in the sphere of learning English although this was by accident and not design.

The American Ceylon Mission was started in the Jaffna peninsula by the American Methodist Missionaries in 1816. In her very recent book, "Communal politics under the Donoughmore Constitution" Jane Russell gives a good account of the services rendered by these missionaries to education in Jaffna.

According to her, the reason why the Mission chose Jaffna as the focus of its activities was because "the colonial government was anxious to avoid a clash with the English Missions and partly because its strategic position was the key to India which was the Mission's main target".

By 1822, 42 schools staffed by Americans who were fluent in Tamil, had been established in the peninsula. In 1823, was set up the Batticotta (not to be confused with Batticaloa) Seminary at Vaddukoddai. This was the first English school in Asia. It was a free boarding school whose standard has been compared to that of a University, It taught English, Tamil prose, Mathematics, Greek, Latin History, Geography and. Philosophy.

In 1833, a professor of Medicine arrived and thereafter the Seminary turned out medical students and potential doctors. The methods of the American Ceylon Mission was reported to be infinitely more advanced and the missionaries more dedicated than those in the English Mission Schools in the rest of Ceylon.

Having learnt Tamil thoroughly, the Americans translated English text books into Tamil and compiled comprehensive English-Tamil dictionaries. As Colebrooke pointed out in 1830, the level of English education imparted in Jaffna was much higher than elsewhere in Ceylon as a result of the Americans asserting the importance of teaching English (unlike other missions).

Due to a financial crisis, the colonial government cut down expenditure on education by half during the end of 1847. This did not affect the American Ceylon Mission. The effect was that the government's schools in the South-West were outclassed completely. In 1929 there existed in the Jaffna peninsula 65 English schools, 10 of them being first/class Collegiate Schools, and 426 Vernacular schools. In that year, the Northern province had 6 out of 7 children attending some form schools.

As K. Balasingam said in a speech in 1913, we have cultivated the only thing that could have been cultivated with profit despite the aridity of our soil. We 'have attempted to cultivate men'.

The Americans were followed by Catholic and Protestant Missionaries who all proceeded to set up schools as part of their aim of proselytising. When Hindu revivalism started, there was formed the Hindu Board of Education which, in turn, opened up its schools. Thus, Jaffna became blessed with many schools. It was said that, at one stage, Jaffna had more schools per square mile than anywhere else in the world.

This gave a great impetus to the study of the English, a language which was the language of administration of the British Colonialists. Naturally, the Tamils obtained more posts in the government's service and the professions, like law and medicine, out of proportion to their numbers. But, they were obtained in open competition and not through the back door. According to Jane Russell, the Ceylon Tamils constituted over 40 percent of the franchise for the Educated Members seat in 1918.

A particular reason as to why the Tamil felt the urgent need for better and higher education, particularly in English, was his consciousness that he lived in the most barren and uneconomic part of Sri Lanka which did not boast of a river, a mountain or forest. Education was the only passport to a better life. So he studied hard.

It was a slightly different picture with the Sinhalese in the South. They were blessed with a more fertile land where literally anything grew. Sustenance was easy. But, the educational facilities available to them were less than those available to the Tamils. Besides, till the economic crisis of 1929-1931, the Sinhala middle classes were not that keen to join government service or the professions as their lands could sustain them. It was in the years just before and just after the Second World War that the competition for jobs between the Sinhala and Tamil middle classes grew.

According to the Soulbury Commission report, in the year 1938, out of 6002 pensionable officers, 3236 were Sinhalese and 1164 were Ceylon Tamils. Much of the friction between the two communities arose over the disputes about the social proportions in certain departments in the public service. The communal problem, therefore, is at bottom a competition between the respective middle classes for entry into government service and the professions and for trade opportunities.

According to Jane Russell, the "golden age" of the Ceylon Tamils can be approximately ascribed to the 50 years between 1870 and 1920. In this period, the excellence of the English school system in the Jaffna peninsula enabled large numbers of the Jaffnese to find lucrative employment in the civil and clerical services of Malaya, India and Ceylon. Economically wealthy, the Jaffna Tamils had become politically powerful. The Coomaraswamy - Ponnambalam dynasty had been able to dominate the other communal representatives in the Legislative Council in the 19th century, and had therefore become the acknowledged leaders of the English - educated elite of both communities.

When Ponnambalam Ramanathan was elected the first all-island representative in 1912 against the opposition of a Sinhalese, Marcus Fernando, he acquired de - jure the official recognition as spokesman of the English educated elite, which had been his de facto role for over 30 years.

In 1916, his brother, Ponnambalam Arunachalam entered the political arena. From the outset of his political career, Arunachalam towered above his Sinhalese and Tamil contemporaries. Almost immediately he was recognised as the leader of the English educated elite. The founder of the Ceylon National Congress, as well as a number of labour organisations, Arunachalam dominated Ceylon's politics for the remaining 7 years of his life. When he left the Congress in 1922 it marked the end of the ascendancy of the Ceylon Tamils in Ceylon politics.

Under Colonial rule the Sinhalese and Tamil leaders worked harmoniously together in pursuit of more and more reforms from the Colonial power. In 1915, after the martial law riots, it was the Tamil knight, Ponnambalam Ramanathan who braved the torpedo infested seas to travel to England to plead the cause of the detained Sinhala leaders, like D. S. Senanayake. Everyone knows the story of how, when Ramanathan returned to the island, the Sinhala leaders, including the then labour leader, A. E. Goonsinha, unharnessed the horses from his chariot and dragged the chariot themselves.

When the Ceylon National Congress was founded in 1919, it was Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam who was elected its first president. In two consecutive elections, for the Educated Members Seat in the old Legislative Council, Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan was elected despite the fact that a majority of the voters were Sinhalese.

But as the British colonialists gave more and more reforms, the Sinhala and Tamil leaders failed to agree about how to share the spoils. The parting of ways came over the refusal of the Sinhala leaders to support the Tamil demand for a communal seat for the Tamils of the Western province. The Sinhala leaders wanted territorial representation because it would favour them while the Tamil leaders wanted communal representation which would be beneficial to them. It was over this dispute that the Ponnambalam brothers resigned from the Ceylon National Congress.

With the advent of the Donoughmore reforms, the situation became worse. The Donoughmore constitution carried within the germs of communal dissension. By granting adult franchise and territorial representation, the British ensured Sinhalese majority rule.

That is why Ceylon Tamil leaders, like Ponnambalam Ramanathan, had vehemently opposed adult franchise. He opposed it for two reasons. One was that he didn't want to have "mob rule" by the franchise being thrown open to illiterates. On the other, he knew that majority rule would mean Sinhalese rule. That fear has been proved correct. It was for these reasons that the Tamils asked for communal representation or safeguards for the minorities which was rejected by the Donoughmore Commission.

In a homogenous society, a full franchise and territorial representation is the ideal thing. When the picture is complicated by the presence of racial and religious minorities, adult franchise and territorial representation would ultimately bring about the subjection of the minority to the

majority. This is what happened in Sri Lanka. The only alternative would have been a healthy left movement which would have cut across, racial, linguistic or caste barriers and concentrated on economic issues which were common to all.

For a time, before the elections to the first State Council in 1931, there existed in the North a progressive organisation called the Youth Congress. The Youth Congress was formed in 1924 by radical Ceylon Tamil youths. Among those who were prominent in its leadership were; S. H. Perinpanayagam, C. Balasingham, P.Kandiah, 'Orator' Subramaniam, M. Balasundaram, P. Nagalingam etc. J. V. Chelliah, Vice Principal of Jaffna College, was elected its first president.

Between 1926 and 1931 Indian independence leaders, Nehru, Satyamoorthy, Sarojini Naidu and Mrs. Kamaladevi came and spoke at vast meetings organised by the Jaffna Youth Congress and spurred the movement on which was to lead to the famous Jaffna Boycott of the State Council elections, nominations to which were to be received on May 4th, 1931.

It carried out the boycott of the 4 northern seats to the State Council during the 1931 elections on the grounds that the Donoughmore Constitution had not granted full independence (Poorna Swaraj) for the whole country - not because the Constitution had not granted special rights to the Tamils. Unfortunately, not one Sinhalese candidate either joined or sympathised with the boycott. The Youth Congress was soon to be submerged by communal politics.

In the South, Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, formed the avowedly communal organisation, the Sinhala Maha Sabha. The Sinhala Maha Sabha was founded in November 1936. A proposal to call it by that name was made by Piyadasa Srisena, a famous literary figure of that time. Bandaranaike tried to get the name changed to Swadeshiya Maha Sabha (The greater congress of the Indigenous peoples). But it was opposed by Munidasa Cumaratunga, another famous literary figure, and others and defeated. By the late 1930s, both Piyadasa Sirisena and Munidasa Cumaratunga had left the Maha Sabha and it was developed into an effective political organisation by Bandaranaike.

In the North Mr. G. G. Ponnambalam formed the All Ceylon Tamil Congress. The interesting point is that communalism in the South spawns communalism in the North and vice versa.

The situation was made worse in 1936, after the elections to the Second State Council, when D. S. Senanayake, in search of unanimity inside his Board of Ministers for his reforms proposals to White Hall, formed a Pan-Sinhala Board of Ministers, excluding any representative of the minorities.

Communal politics had become the order of the day. The Soulbury Commission has pointed out that the formation of the Pan-Sinhala Ministry indicated a policy of the majority using its power to the detriment of the minorities. One of the Commissioners, F. Rees said, "the minorities were naturally more convinced than ever that the Sinhalese aimed at domination". It is interesting to note that the four European nominated members of the second State Council joined Senanayake in the 'Plot' to elect a Pan-Sinhala board of ministers. But, Senanayake went back on his promise to make one of them a minister and the alliance broke up.

On behalf of the Tamils, Mr. G. G. Ponnambalam, through his All Ceylon Tamil Congress, put forward his cry of fifty-fifty. Reduced to simple terms, this demand meant that electorates must be so delimited that in a Council of 100 members, 50 members would be Sinhalese while the balance should be distributed between the minorities (25 to the Ceylon Tamils and the balance to the other minorities). This demand was not acceptable to the Sinhalese leaders although it was rumoured that just before parliamentary elections of 1947, through his party man, A. Mahadeva, who had been Home Minister, D. S. Senanayake agreed to accept a proposal of 60:40. But, G. G. Ponnambalam was not statesman enough to accept it.

But, what was tragic in this situation was that these conflicting claims of the two major communities were used by the colonial power to perpetuate its domination – the classical imperialist strategy of divide and rule. How much better it would have been for the Tamil leaders to have joined forces with their Sinhalese brethren in a common demand to the imperialist master. But that would have been statesmanship of a stature to which the bourgeois leadership of neither was equal. The Sinhalese leadership, for its part, was unable to be magnanimous and accommodate the just demands of the Tamil people and thus present a united front against British rule. They tended to identify the Sinhalese with the Sri Lankan nation and to be unmindful of the legitimate rights of racial, and linguistic minorities.

The British Government appointed the Soulbury Commission to hear the request for more reforms to Sri Lanka. When the Commission arrived in Sri Lanka, the different communities made their separate representation to the Commission. D. S. Senanayake and the Sinhala leaders did not appear before the Commission but gave their views in private to Lord Soulbury.

British imperialism was then going through the phase of transition from direct rule to indirect rule, from colonialism to neocolonialism. The end of the second World War saw Britain reduced to the status of a second rate power. It knew that it could not continue to rule its colonies by direct force as before. It decided to come to an agreement with the dominant local bourgeoisie and to transfer political power to it in return for the safe guarding of its economic interests.

Having held out all sorts of promises to the Tamil minority, ultimately, the British came to an agreement with the Sinhalese majority, leaving the Tamils out in the cold. The system of Parliamentary government, with a prime minister and a cabinet, was granted to Sri Lanka and the Tamil representatives were reduced to a permanent minority in parliament.

D. S. Senanayake also struck against the Indian Tamils. These plantation workers, because of their class position, had supported the Left movement and helped to elect anti-UNP M.P.s in at least 14 electorates to the first parliament - apart from electing seven M. Ps through their own organisation.

D. S. Senanayake acted swiftly and, in 1948 by means of the Citizenship Acts, deprived the bulk of them of their citizenship rights and hence, their voting rights. This worsened what is being referred to as the Ceylon Indian problem. In 1964, Premier Sirimavo Bandaranaike went to India and signed a pact with Indian Premier, Lal Bahadur Shastri, by which Sri Lanka agreed to grant citizenship to three hundred thousand people of Indian origin while India agreed to take back five hundred and forty five thousand. The fate of the balance was to be decided later.

The acceptance of these figures by Sri Lanka was itself a tacit admission of the unfairness of the earlier citizenship laws. But, the major drawback of this Pact was that it said not a word as to what would happen if these figures were not reached on a voluntary basis. Supposing five hundred and forty five thousands did not opt to go to India? Was force to be used? The question was left beautifully vague.

At a subsequent date, both governments agreed to divide equally between themselves the one and a half million people whose fate was left undecided earlier. This still left about half a million people of Indian origin stateless. After every communal violence there are increasing numbers of people of Indian origin who, are even willing to forego their Sri Lankan citizenship and return to India. This figure has increased beyond measure after the 1983 violence.

The communal situation in Sri Lanka became worse after 1956 and the passing of the Sinhala only act. The newly aroused nationalism of the Sinhalese, which was set in motion by the populist policies of Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, was unfortunately directed against the Tamils instead of against the foreign imperialists and their economic and cultural subjection of the whole country.

The communal cancer that was festering inside suddenly erupted into the open in 1955 — in the form of the language controversy. Up to that time, all political parties, had accepted that both Sinhala and Tamil (Swabhasha) would replace English as the official languages. In fact when, in 1943 Mr. Bandaranaike moved his reforms resolution in the Second State Council, he made this precise proposal. Incidentally one of the very few to oppose this proposal in the State Council was the present president, J. R. Jayawardena, then member for Kelaniya. Suddenly the agitation broke out among the Sinhalese that Sinhala only should be the State language.

Straight away one peculiar feature of this must be noted. In most countries, the communal problem takes the form of an agitation by a minority to safeguard its linguistic or other rights from being trampled, under foot by a majority. But, in Sri Lanka, it was a majority who spear headed an agitation to safeguard its language against what it feared was encroachment by the language of the minority. The peculiar reasons which make the Sinhalese majority behave and act as it was a minority must be studied and appreciated if we are to arrive anywhere near an understanding of this complicated problem

The reasons that make the Sinhalese behave like a minority in the land where they are actually a majority are many.

The first is the memory of the ancient Tamil invasions from South India. The Sinhalese are never allowed to forget this. Which school boy has not read of the epic battle between Duttugemunu, and Elara? Every time one goes to view the ruins of Anuradhapura or Polonnaruwa, he is reminded that all these ancient glories of Sinhalese civilisation were brought to destruction by successive Tamil invasions from South India.

Secondly the British imperialists brought over nearly a million Tamil workers from South India during the last century to work in their plantations and dumped them in the midst of Kandyan

territory. Thereby, they created the Ceylon-Indian problem — another cause for communal bickerings.

Thirdly the increased educational facilities made available to the Tamils in the North as a result of missionary activity resulted in Tamils obtaining a higher percentage in government service and in the professions than their population figures warranted. When, after the 1929-1931 world economic crisis, unemployment became a serious problem among the Sinhala middle classes and they started to turn towards service under government in large numbers they found the Tamils well entrenched.

It must be pointed out that economic issues were at the bottom of the language crisis. Before 1956, knowledge of the English language had been the passport to service under the government. As a result, the Tamils were able to compete on equal or even better terms with the Sinhalese. Compelled by the pressure of unemployment the Sinhalese wanted Sinhala only to be the official language — thus giving them the best chances of service under the government. Because, in a non-industrialised country like Sri Lanka, government is not only the biggest single employer but government service is also the most gainful occupation, the battle of the languages was in reality a battle for government jobs for the respective middle classes. That is also the reason why no solution other than an economic one can ever bring lasting results.

Fourthly, Tamil happens to be a language spoken by over 53 million people in Tamil Nadu across the Palk straits. The Sinhalese thus feel that the number of Tamil speaking people in the region (bracketing Tamil Nadu with Sri Lanka) out-number those speaking Sinhalese by about 5 : 1. Hence the fear of cultural absorption of the Sinhalese by the Tamils.

Without an appreciation of these historical realities, it is impossible to understand the development of the language question of Sri Lanka. After the MEP victory, Mr. Bandaranaike made one serious attempt to settle the language question through negotiation with the Tamil leader, S. J. V. Chelvanayagam. The result of these negotiations was the famous Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact. It accepted certain safeguards for the Tamil language in the Northern and Eastern part of Sri Lanka under the general context of the acceptance of Sinhala as the official language of the whole of Ceylon. It also reached certain compromises on the vexed question on colonisation in the Tamil areas.

It is necessary here to make some reference to the relationship between the communal problem and colonisation. The question of land or territory is intimately connected with the national or minority problem. Without a contiguous territory to inhabit, no national group can develop into a nation. That is why we find in Sri Lanka that, on the one hand, the Tamils want to protect their traditional homelands from forcible colonisation by State schemes which would end up by changing the ethnic character of these areas. On the other hand, we find that Sinhala bourgeois leaders, from D. S. Senanayake onwards, have harboured ideas about changing Tamil majority areas into Sinhalese majority areas by means of state colonisation schemes.

When, after the 1935 Land Commission report which highlighted the fact that the peasantry in Sri Lanka was dying out as a class, D. S. Senanayake started his colonisation schemes, most of these were located in what is called the dry zone. In the beginning most of these were in the

North Central province. But some were also started in the northern and eastern provinces, which had been claimed by the Tamils as their traditional home-lands.

Of course, during a greater part of history the island was ruled by the Sinhalese. But there were intermittent invasions by the Cholas who had ruled big parts of Sri Lanka. Despite the attempts by the Sinhalese kings to subjugate them, Tamil Kingdoms repeatedly made their appearance, in the north. When the Portuguese arrived in the island in 1505, one such Tamil Kingdom existed in the north and was overrun by them. Therefore, if we take the last four centuries or so, the claims of the Tamils to have inhabited the Northern and Eastern provinces is not far-fetched.

D. S. Senanayake, was not only a through going reactionary but a shrewd Sinhalese leader. He never openly professed communalism despite the fact that he was responsible for the pan-Sinhala Board of Ministers in 1936. But he steadfastly worked towards the goal of Sinhaling the Tamil areas. This fact was revealed by one of his closest colleagues. V. Ratnayake, in a speech made after the death of D. S.

The Bandaranaike - Chelvanayagam pact was possibly the best compromise under the circumstances, But it was not given a chance. The UNP tried to fish in troubled waters and organised a march to Kandy to mobilise opposition to the pact. This March was led by Mr. J. R. Jayawardena who was later to become the president of the country. The march was aborted at Imbulgoda by the SLFP M. P. for Gampaha lying on the road with his followers.

Bandaranaike probably rose to his greatest height as a statesman in his defence of the pact. His famous - probably his best - speech made at the Bogambara grounds, Kandy, will always be remembered as embodying all that was best in him. That speech was recorded and relayed repeatedly over Radio Ceylon. Faced with a hostile press, which was then entirely privately owned, Mr. Bandaranaike put his skill as an orator to the best use and used the state Radio to publicise his views.

But, the chauvinistic elements in his camp also rebelled. Instead of coming to his help, the leaders of the Federal party chose this very moment to launch the silly anti-Sri campaign. They did not have the statesmanship to realise that Mr. Bandaranaike was the only Sinhalese leader of recent times who had sufficient national stature and public support to have pushed through a solution to the Tamil problem. The pact was torn up. The anti-Sri campaign of the Federal Party was countered by the Tar-brush campaign led by the Sinhala 'warrior' K. M. P. Rajaratna in the south, in the, course of which Tamil words on public -places were all obliterated by a liberal application of tar.

1958 Communal Violence & thereafter

Tension mounted on both sides till it led to the worst communal bloodbath so far in Sri Lanka's history. A much worse one was to occur in July 1983. The 1958 communal violence against the Tamils is an event about which every right thinking Sri Lankan should hang his head 'down in shame. It will remain a permanent blot in our country's history. Overnight, men turned into beasts, and descended to the level that they could pour petrol over and set fire to people with whom they had no quarrel except that they spoke a different tongue.

I well remember watching the beginning of this communal violence on the streets of Colombo from the top storey of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank building, seated in the offices of Messrs. Julius and Creasy Ltd. where I was discussing the terms of the settlement of an industrial dispute with a senior partner of that firm. Simultaneously, I received a telephone message from my office to hurry back immediately. Colombo was going up in flames and it was no longer safe for Tamils to be on the streets.

I was then staying with a Sinhalese couple in Pitta Kotte. After spending an uneasy night there, we decided that it would be unsafe to stay there. With my friends' entire family we went by car to an estate belonging to a relation of my friend near Getahetta. There, we stayed for about a week till Colombo came back to normal. The anti-Tamil violence was a reflection of the political bankruptcy of both the MEP' and the federal party. The fact that the Tamils stranded in the south had to be taken to the north by ship, represented the lowest ebb to which communal relations between the Sinhalese and the Tamils had fallen up to the time.

The only two parties, with a majority of Sinhala members, who took up a principled stand on, the language question were the CP and the LSSP who stood for parity between Sinhala and Tamil and whose members in parliament voted against the Sinhala only act. But they took a severe beating among the Sinhala communalists. Their meetings were broken up. Ultimately they succumbed to Sinhala chauvinism because of parliamentary opportunism and finally declared their support for Sinhala as the only official language. The rot of revisionism and reformism had already set in inside these parties.

It is time to continue the story of the question of the national problem. The passing of the Sinhala Only Act in 1956 was a watershed in the relations between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Clearly the Federal party was faced with a political crisis. Its leaders, who were detained during the early days of the state of emergency which followed the communal violence, had proved themselves powerless to protect the Tamils outside Jaffna. But it continued its sterile course - preaching communalism in the north and estranging even progressive Sinhalese opinion, by opposing every radical measure brought forward by the two Bandaranaike governments e. g. the nationalisation of the buses, the paddy lands bill, the school takeover etc.

Their tactics consisted in hoping that the Sinhalese voters would divide more or less evenly between the two major Sinhala parties, the UNP and the SLFP and that they could strike an opportunistic bargain with whichever party was willing to grant more concessions to the Tamils. It was nothing but an attempt to trade the rights of the Tamils at the table of one or the other of the two Sinhalese parties. Such an opportunity did arise for the Federal Party in 1965. But we will refer to it later.

It was a fact that in the general election in 1956 the Tamils in the Sinhalese areas had voted for the SLFP as against the UNP. Mr. Bandaranaike realised that the Sinhala only act had irrevocably estranged this support. He, therefore, brought forward a bill in parliament to provide for the Reasonable Use of Tamil. But, due to the pressure of the die-hards in his camp, no regulations were framed under it and it remained a virtual dead letter. When a subsequent UNP government tried to frame these regulations, it came into violent opposition from the SLFP. In

any case, the bill was not acceptable to the Tamils.

In the meantime internal strife had begun inside the MEP. The MEP was, at its best, only a marriage of convenience between forces holding divergent views but united under the personality of Mr. Bandaranaike and by their common opposition to the UNP.

The stress of keeping forces with such divergent views together proved too much. The split came in early 1959 over the issue of an Agricultural Cooperative Bank and that of raising the guaranteed price of paddy - both of which were mooted by leftist Gunawardena. Philip Gunawardena and his colleague William Silva quit the Cabinet. At the Kurunegala sessions of the SLFP which took place almost immediately after this, Bandaranaike was forced to make his first anti-communist speech.

Mr. Bandaranaike was left as a prisoner in the hands of the reactionary elements in his cabinet - some of whose representatives successfully planned his assassination on 25th of September 1959. As he bent low to pay his respects to a Buddhist monk, who was seated on his verandah the monk whipped out a pistol from out of his robe, and emptied it into the frail figure of the prime minister. It was the eve of the day on which the Prime Minister was to have left for the UNO. On the next day, the Prime Minister succumbed to his injuries.

The circumstances of his death as well as the spirit of forgiveness he displayed to his assailant have built a halo around his name. An attempt was even made to deify him. Under such circumstances, no sober appraisal of his place in Sri Lankan politics has been made. A legend has sprung up about the so called Bandaranaike policies which he is alleged to have followed. But if anyone is pinned down to explain what is meant by such policies, no satisfactory answer is forthcoming. Perhaps, the vagueness of the concept permits each one to interpret it in his own way and do as he likes, all the while claiming to be a devout follower of the Bandaranaike policies - which is what is happening now.

But even if one tries to discern any recognisable element in the policies followed by Bandaranaike, one might say that he thought that he was a sort of bridge between two worlds - one that was not yet dead, and the other not yet born. That was why he was fond of referring to Sri Lanka's present phase as an age of transition. He tried to outline what he called a middle way, by which he meant the avoidance of the extremes of both capitalism and communism. This was, of course, an illogical and unscientific concept.

The choice for Sri Lanka was not between capitalism and communism. Anyway there is no middle way between the two. The choice for Sri Lanka was between the slavery of neo-colonialism and genuine national independence.

Bandaranaike could not see this. When, he died, the chains of neo-colonialism were riveted on Sri Lanka even more firmly than when he took power. The exploitation to which the mass of the people was subjected remained just as severe. Not a single economic problem had been solved. The concept of a middle way is really an attempt to prettify the continuance of the status quo and an explanation for postponing radical change.

In the realm of foreign affairs, at least, Bandaranaike's policy of nonalignment meant that Sri Lanka moved away from her position of being a camp follower of the imperialist powers. But non-alignment was not a dynamic policy. For the most part, it meant making the best of both Worlds, and playing one side against other. Still, it paid dividends up to a point. Beyond that all countries have to choose sides. Some of the most vociferously non-aligned countries have today ended up among the most aligned countries. In any case Bandaranaike's non-aligned policy won Sri Lanka more friends in the international field than ever before.

One result of Mr. Bandaranaike moving away from the pro-western attitudes of the previous UNP governments was the opening of diplomatic relations between Sri Lanka and the Socialist countries.

The Soviet Union was the first socialist country to open an embassy in Colombo. It was soon followed by the People's Republic of China and then by other Socialist countries of Eastern Europe.

The importance of this significant change can be understood when one remembers that during Sir John's regime, even a Soviet Scientists' team to view the solar eclipse and even a Soviet Soccer team were refused permission to enter Sri Lanka.

It is interesting to note that when during the immediate flush of his electoral victory in 1956, Mr. Bandaranaike was asked for his views on the threat of world communism, his characteristic reply was, "If the world wants to go Communist, who am I to stop it".

In fact, it must be conceded that he was very much to the left of Pandit Nehru then Prime Minister of India who was even, then a prisoner of India's right wing forces. This is, in part, explained by the fact that Bandaranaike came to power at the head of the progressive forces and by defeating the right wing and reactionary forces represented by the UNP whereas Nehru, from the beginning, united both right and left behind his broad back. In fact, Nehru was so worried at the progressive turn in foreign affairs by the Bandaranaike's regime that he sent his trouble-shooter, Krishna Menon, to Sri Lanka to caution Bandaranaike to follow a more moderate policy. It would seem that Bandaranaike agreed to fall in step.

One result of the liberal foreign policy, followed by Mr. Bandaranaike was the first visit to Sri Lanka. by China's Prime Minister, Chou En-lai. He was to come a second time during Mrs. Bandaranaike's SLFP regime. Chou En-lai's visit was an extremely popular one and crowds mobbed him where ever he went.

One event that happened during his visit deserves to be mentioned. The Chinese Prime Minister was here on a February 4 which was then celebrated as National Day. There was a public meeting held at Independence Square, Colombo and Chou En-lai spoke at that meeting. Professor G. P. Malalasekera translated him into Sinhalese. During the speech, it started to rain. Prof. Malalasekera who, with Chou En-lai, was standing on the open platform, tried to withdraw into the pavillion in order to avoid the rain. But Chou En-lai held him firm by the arm and got him to continue the translation while he spoke in the rain. By this time the crowd was covered by a sea of umbrellas. In a spontaneous gesture of appreciation of Chou En-lai's action, one and all

closed their umbrellas and braved the rain. I have never seen such a spontaneous and silent tribute to a leader.

In internal affairs, the MEP government's rule was like a breath of fresh air. After the rigours of UNP repression there was a sense of freedom which was reflected by the incident of the first day of the opening of parliament when crowds burst through ail cordons to swamp the House of Representatives and to feel and touch the seats on which their representatives sat. It was, to a certain extent, an identification of the people with the newly elected government on which they placed so much hope.

In the labour front also it was a reversal of the pro-employer attitudes and policies of the previous UNP governments. Labour felt free not only to voice their demands but also to come out on strike in support of their demands. The inevitable result was a rash of strikes for which some people have condemned the left movement which gave leadership to the strikes.

Such people failed to realise that you cannot give freedom to people and not expect them to use it to obtain their demands. However, one immediate victory to the working class as a result of the MEP government coming into power was the reinstatement of all those who lost their employment from government service as a result of the general strike of May-June 1947.

In 1956 our Ceylon Trade Union Federation itself was not recognised by the Employers' Federation of Ceylon because it was led by the communist party. They never replied to our letters nor attended conferences at the Labour Department. This was a serious handicap, particularly because the LSSP - led Trade unions had no such difficulty. We were forced to function through the factory committees at the various work places. I remember well that, soon after the MEP government was formed, we led a strike at Brooke Bond Ltd. who were the premier tea exporter of the country. In as much as revenue derived from the export of tea continued to be the main source of income for the government, no government could tolerate a prolonged strike in the tea export industry. Mr. Bandaranaike immediately called a conference of both parties at his prime minister's office. I represented the striking workers and was promptly asked by Mr. Bandranaike why we could not talk to the employers and arrive at a settlement. I replied that the employer did not recognise us and that, therefore, we were not on talking terms.

Mr. Bandaranaike showed his disapproval. The English vice-chairman, of the Employers' Federation, who was mainly responsible for our non - recognition, was away on leave in England. The employers were represented at this conference by Mr. Rowan who was a senior partner of Julius & Creasy, lawyers to the employers. He took me to a side and assured, me that he would see to it that recognition was granted. There afterwards the settlement of the strike was not difficult.

I am mentioning, this incident to prove that Mr. Bandaranaike's liberal policies and his readiness to permit the organisation of labour certainly increased its bargaining capacity. It must be stated on record that Mr. Bandaranaike never enunciated the policy of refusing to negotiate during a strike. This reactionary position was to be put forward during the subsequent SLFP government, by Mr. Felix Dias Bandaranaike.

There were two general strike in this period - one in 1957 led by the LSSP and other in 1958 led by the. CF. The first strike resulted in the increase of the cost of living allowances to public servants, while the second one won the extension of these increases to the private sector. Of course, this period also witnessed bitter, internecine rivalry between the LSSP and the CP for leadership of the Trade Union Movement. This seriously weakened the bargaining capacity of the, workers. Nevertheless trade union membership increased several fold during this period. It also saw the emergence, for the first time, of Trade Unions sponsored by the government party - thus enjoying official patronage and support - a kind of company union. This was a most unfortunate development because it led to the pernicious habit of workers crossing over to unions sponsored by the ruling party (particularly in the public and corporation sector) after every general election.

I must mention here that, in 1957, I was appointed General Secretary of the Ceylon Trade Union Federation- the post in which I have served ever since. In the preceding years, I had mainly worked in the party front. Now I devoted the major part of my time to Trade Union work. This accidental fact was to have a lot of bearing in the split that developed inside the CP in 1963-1964.

I was General Secretary of the CTUF when it called the general strike in the private sector in April 1958 over the main demand for payment of the, government rate of dearness allowance for employees in the private sector' too. It was a near complete success in the Tea and Rubber export trade, while workers in several large engineering establishments also came out. A section of the harbour workers also struck. The near complete strike in the tea and rubber export trade brought about the cancelation of tea auctions in Colombo. The government could not ignore the strike beyond 3 to 4 weeks because the major income of the government was derived from the export of tea.

Mr. Bandaranaike called the CTUF for a conference. M. G. Mendis was president of CTUF at this time. For some reason which I have forgotten, Mendis was persona non grata with the then Commissioner of Labour, Mr. C. B. Kumarasinghe. The latter telephoned me with the request that I should be the sole representative of the CTUF. This was obviously with the intention of keeping Mendis out of the discussions I was not happy with this condition. But Mendis as well as the executive committee persuaded me to go alone because they did not want any chance of placing our point of view before the Prime Minister to go by default.

The conference was fixed for 10 o'clock of a morning at the Senate Office of the Prime Minister. I remember Mr. T. B.. Illangaratne, then Minister for labour, waiting with me for the Prime Minister's arrival. He eventually arrived at 2 P. M. without any word of apology for the delay. it would seem that punctuality was never one of the 'virtues' of Mr. Bandaranaike,

However, the discussions yielded no result. There were other discussions too, but with the same disappointing results. Employers met the Prime Minister separately. The strike had ultimately to be called off because of the outbreak of communal violence and the declaration of the state of emergency.

I remember that the Labour Commissioner telephoned me and told me that the Governor-General

wanted the strike called off. There was, of course, no question of continuing the strike under the tense situation that prevailed in the country. But we stuck out for one condition. The Employers had declared that all strikers who did not report to work by a certain date had already been considered to have vacated post. In fact some of them had even recruited, new labour. We told the Labour Commissioner to inform the Governor-General that we would call off the strike if all strikers were taken back in employment. The demand was accepted. We called off the strike and no striker lost his job. Before another year had passed most of the demands of the strike were won by us by means of a collective agreement with the Employers Federation of Ceylon.

In other spheres too, Mr. Bandaranaike's government took progressive steps. Fulfilling a promise made by him during the 1955 South Western bus strike (led by the CP) he nationalised the bus services. This was a clear boon to the travelling public. He also established an Employees Provident Fund to cover the entire private and semi public sectors. This was a great step forward for the working class because for the first time it started to receive compensation for their past services. To the credit of Mr. Bandaranaike it must be stated that he overcame chauvinistic objections among his own ranks and succeeded in getting the plantation workers of Indian origin included in this provident fund scheme.

1956 also saw the election, for the first and the last time, of a left candidate to Parliament from a Tamil area. P. Kandiah was elected as Member of Parliament to the Point Pedro seat on the ticket of the Communist Party. I have already referred to Kandiah as one of the three who returned to Sri Lanka after studies at Cambridge and Oxford. He returned during my second year at the University and played a big part in influencing me towards communism.

He had contested the seat twice earlier and succeeded on his third attempt. I remember going to Point Pedro to work for him and speaking at several election meetings. It would, of course, not be correct to claim Kandiah's victory entirely as a victory for the communist party. There were a lot of personal reasons for his victory. Kandiah was a highly respected intellectual who was loved for his personal traits. In addition, the vote of the sizable so-called depressed castes came to him as a candidate for the Communist Party.

Kandiah's election to Parliament at that time was a shot in the arm for the communist party and increased its influence among the Tamils. Kandiah was an able Parliamentarian and shone in debates. He also did a lot of work in his electorate, particularly for the so-called depressed castes - like building separate schools for them. Unfortunately building separate schools does not abolish the caste system. It only perpetuates it. Whatever that may be, no future communist candidate was able to reap the benefit of his work.

[End of the excerpts. Some typos have been corrected in the above version.]