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Ceylon

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"They are a people proper and very well favoured,
beyond all people that I have seen in India,
wearing a cloth about their loins, and a doublet
after the English fashion..."

17th century English traveller

"The hills and valleys are ornamented with flowers
and trees of great variety and beauty, the cries
of animals rejoicing together fill the air
with gladness, and the landscape abounds with
splendour."

19th century Chinese geography

"From the walls of Anuradapura
To the bay of Trincomalee,
We will fight our country's minorities
Till they can hardly see."

Contemporary Buddhist hymn, apocryphal

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Dear Dick,

Truly the island of Ceylon, among whose people and palms I spent last week, is a tropical paradise. But it is a paradise with troubles. An example of Ceylon's major problem was visible as I drove for the first time from the house of friends down Galle Road along the sea toward 'the fort', now Colombo's business district but established by the Portuguese at the beginning of the 16th century. At one intersection the doors of the shops were open and business seemed brisk; yet sheets of metal and boards covered the shop windows. This was the scene, I was told, of the language riots touched off by Sinhalese nationalists last January. The windows had been broken by the mob and nearby a Buddhist monk had been killed by police firing. The newspapers reported that 90 other persons had been injured. The Government declared a state of emergency, which is still in force, and called on the army to preserve order.

The dimensions of Ceylon's second great problem can be seen in the pages of its budget. The nation grows only about 55% of the rice it eats and spends about 70% of its foreign exchange earnings on imports of this and other foods. When the present government took office, in March 1965,

the Prime Minister claimed that the treasury was empty of foreign exchange, and it was announced in the press at the time that there was an operating cash deficit of more than 100 million rupees. The present coalition government, lead by Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake, will succeed or fall depending on its ability to master these two problems: communal friction as manifested in the language issue, and the nation's financial crisis, which is basically a matter of agricultural production.

Of the two issues, language is generally believed to be the more important because it can tear the country apart, so disturbing civil government that no progress can be made in agriculture and toward improving the economic situation generally. The language problem in Ceylon consists primarily of competition between two communities, the Sinhalese and the so-called Ceylon Tamils. The ancestors of the Sinhalese, according to legend and Buddhist chronicles, came to Ceylon from Bengal about 500 B.C. led by a prince who was the son or grandson of a king named Sinha (the lion). They subdued the aborigines, called Veddhas, and settled down. Aryans and originally Brahmins, they were converted to Buddhism after 270 B.C., and Buddhism became the state religion. Ceylon continued to be a stronghold of the faith after it had virtually disappeared from India. Today it is the popular religion of the island with nearly eight million adherents, nearly all of whom speak Sinhalese. During the eighth century A.D. the Sinhalese kingdoms weakened, and from the 10th to 14th centuries there were periodic invasions by the Tamil empires of South India. By the 14th century the Tamils, who were Hindus, had established a kingdom in the northern part of the island. The Tamils never controlled the southern parts of the country, but they profoundly affected it culturally, and Indian influence is marked throughout Ceylon. Today the descendents of these invaders, the Ceylon Tamils, number approximately one million and they continue to be concentrated in the north. Their language is Tamil, although not precisely the Tamil of Madras and the eastern half of South India, and their religion, as has been said, is Hinduism. Ceylon Tamils consider themselves Ceylonese, not Indian. Although these two communities constitute the core of the communal problem in Ceylon, they are by no means all there is to it. From the 13th century onwards traders and invaders from the West began to influence the politics and the culture of the country. First came Arab traders and a few settlers. Their descendents now number about half a million and are referred to as Moors. Although their religious language is Arabic and their attraction to Islam strong, they are well integrated and these days they usually speak the local language—Sinhalese in Sinhalese areas and Tamil in Tamil areas. With the 16th century came invaders from Europe, first the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and finally the English—whose authority arrived in the 1790's via the East India Company. Together, these countries brought Christianity to Ceylon and, of their languages, English remains important. Their descendents, by intermarriage with Ceylonese, are called Burghers, and although there are not many more than 100,000 of them, their influence has been strong. English is their "mother tongue". In the 19th and 20th centuries there was another influx of Tamils, this time as workers on the coffee and tea estates in the hills. This group also numbers about one million, but few of them are Ceylonese citizens and they maintain strong contacts with their homeland. They are called Indian Tamils, and their allegiance is primarily to India.

On becoming independent in 1948, Ceylon was faced with the problem of creating a united nation from this variety of groups. As in all newly independent nations, there began a search for national identity, for a definition of Ceylonese-ness. What was Ceylon and what was a Ceylonese? What was the

Ceylonese "tradition" religiously, culturally, and politically? In what language should the nation speak? This question spawned subsidiary questions concerning the language of education and of government and the fate of English—the "common" language of the upper, and governing, classes, as well as of the Burghers, yet at the same time the language of the wished-to-be-forgotten colonial past. In the early years things went well enough. Education was to be in the "mother tongue" of children and "swabash" (meaning the use of Sinhalese or Tamil as the occasion demanded) began to be used more and more in government, although the principal language of government continued to be English. As time went on fears and antagonisms grew. The Tamils feared that their minority status might prejudice their share in national life and their position in the civil services. Sinhalese feared both the energy of the Tamil minority and the continued use of English, which might deprive all but the better educated of their community of positions in government and the professions. (There was also competition between the "low-country Sinhalese", with their exposure to foreign learning and techniques, and the "up-country Sinhalese" in the hills who felt themselves simpler and hard done by their more sophisticated fellows.) As a result of fear and of reaction and counter-reaction, deep-seated images and stereotypes came to the surface; consciousness of race—the Tamils are Dravidians and often darker skinned than the allegedly Aryan-descended Sinhalese—and of religion grew. Politicians and political parties began to take sides, both from conviction and, no doubt, hoping to ride these passions into power. Groups with strong Sinhalese Buddhist sentiments began to claim that the "true" Ceylon is Buddhist and Sinhalese-speaking, much in the same manner that Hindi-enthusiasts in India claim that the "true India" is Hindu—as opposed to Muslim or Christian—and Hindi speaking. For Sinhalese nationalists, theirs should be the only language of Ceylon—and from this flows cultural implications such as the ascendancy of Buddhism. The Tamils and the smaller minorities, however, envisage Ceylon as a multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual society.

By 1956 matters were coming to a head. Several opposition parties and segments of the ruling United National Party were demanding that Sinhalese be made the only official language of the country. In the general election that year S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (S.L.F.P.) came to power with a landslide victory largely because of its "Sinhalese Only" policy. The S.L.F.P. conceded, however, that Tamil could be used for administration in the Tamil areas of the North. In July 1956 an official Language Act was passed making Sinhalese the sole official language of the nation but permitting the continued use of Tamil and English if it were found impracticable to implement the Act at once. During the following months Bandaranaike was put under great pressure by the Tamils to protect their rights and by Sinhalese supporters, among them associations of Buddhist monks, to implement the Act immediately. He vacillated, finally making an agreement with the Tamils only to break it under pressure from the Buddhists. Communal riots resulted in May and June 1958 between Ceylon Tamils and Sinhalese. There was much looting and arson, thousands were left homeless, and several hundred persons were killed. During the emergency declared to allow the government to meet the crisis, legislation was passed protecting Tamil interests in regard to schooling in Tamil and selection for the civil service on the basis of Tamil-language examinations. The irony of all this was that had the Bandaranaike government conceded these points two years earlier, as it had contemplated doing before being dissuaded by extremist Sinhalese pressure, the turmoil and bloodshed would have been avoided. As an American writer on Ceylon has said, "the memory of these events will retard the creation of a unified, modern nation-state commanding the allegiance of all communities"—Wriggins, Ceylon, Dilemmas of a New Nation. Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who became Prime Minister in the general election that followed her husband's assassination in late 1959, took no further steps to mollify the Tamils, and there was some relatively minor unrest in 1961, particularly in the North.

The Senanayake government, however, last January drafted regulations putting into print some of the provisions of the Tamil Language Act passed in 1958. The opposition, led by Mrs. Bandaranaike, opposed the adoption of these regulations and called for a strike. The strike call failed and then, in defiance of a government ban on meetings and processions, the opposition attempted a march on Parliament led by Buddhist monks. The government broke up the procession and in the process shops were damaged and a monk killed. To some Ceylonese I've talked with, the government's action in fulfilling its commitments to the two Tamil parties that joined the coalition, plus its refusal to be coerced by extra-legal pressures, has been courageous and praiseworthy. Some others believe that the government should have tackled economic problems immediately, putting off communal matters until later. It is possible, they say, that the government has put its foot on the communal treadmill and may never get off it. Most observers seem to agree, however, that the Tamils wouldn't have been content to wait and the issue was better faced early than late.

One thing seems certain: that whether or not the government acted wisely in January, communal issues in Ceylon have not been set at rest. The Ceylon Tamils will want to preserve their gains (or improve upon them) and they will continue to face pressure from those seeking to impose Buddhist and Sinhalese language hegemony. The presence of Indian Tamil labor on the tea estates will also probably continue to be an issue, despite the agreement between Mrs. Bandaranaike and the late Prime Minister Shastri in October 1964 to repatriate 525,000 Indians and to give 300,000 of the remainder Ceylonese citizenship over a 15-year period. (The 150,000 or more leftovers were to be the subject of a further agreement between the governments of the two countries.) And the "Indian issue" may well be made stronger--thus affecting the position of the Ceylon Tamils--by the apparently increasing dislike of the Indian merchant community on the island. Many of these merchants are Borahs (a group within the Ismailis of the Shia Muslims who largely come from Bombay and the West coast of India), and they are generally considered to be an unscrupulous lot who victimize Ceylonese of all communities and who smuggle large amounts of currency out of the country. Some observers believe that governmental pressure on the Borahs may be growing and several expressed the cynical hope that they might be made scapegoats, thus taking the pressure off other Indians as well as the Ceylon Tamils. Of lesser importance, but not to be ignored, are the sentiments of the English speakers. Although they constitute only about 7% of the population, the Burghers and the professional classes among the Sinhalese and Ceylon Tamils will strongly (and perhaps with some success) oppose the complete change-over to Sinhalese because they believe it will result in Ceylon's cultural isolation from the world at large and in their own eclipse as an influential, privileged group. The leftists will presumably increasingly support communal causes, in part because some of their number believe communal issues now follow class lines with the more backward countryman and cultivator, generally speaking Sinhalese, struggling against the more privileged Tamil minority, but more likely because these issues are a club ready-made for the opposition to use against the government.

The government and the opposition have usually found themselves on the opposite sides of the language issue no matter which politicians or parties constituted them. The United National Party (U.N.P.), when the principal party in the government from 1948 to 1956, took a calm line on religion and language. Mr. Bandaranaike's S.L.F.P., in opposition, began in the early fifties strongly to support the Buddhists and the Sinhalese nationalists, although it conceded the need for the "reasonable use" of Tamil. Thinking itself forced to equal this vote-catching policy, the U.N.P. ^{also} adopted the slogan of "Sinhalese Only" for the 1956 general elections, which it lost. In office, having won the

general elections, the S.L.F.P. began to modify its position in the face of Tamil pressure. As Bandaranaike bent before the Tamils, the U.N.P., now in opposition, agitated for Sinhalese interests and against capitulation to the Tamils. Yet today the U.N.P. has held out the olive branch to the Tamils, while the S.L.F.P. under Mrs. Bandaranaike's leadership has denounced this, saying that by taking Tamils into the government the U.N.P. is going back on what it claims was the accepted pro-Sinhalese policy of Mr. Bandaranaike. The leftists and Communists have until recently tried to stand above communal issues, but now they have taken the Buddhist cause to heart, bewailing the death of the monk in January's demonstrations as if he had been one of their own. The Buddhists themselves may have had a consistent aim, but they have backed nearly every party at one time or another. They reportedly backed the S.L.F.P. in the 1956 elections (largely because of Bandaranaike's Buddhist sympathies) only to back the U.N.P. in 1965 (allegedly because of Mrs. Bandaranaike's "leftism") and then to return to supporting the S.L.F.P. when the Senanayake government made its recent gesture toward the Tamils. There can be little doubt, according to persons I met, that the Buddhists, both from principle and from the great ambition of some of their leaders, will continue to beat the ethnic drums in favor of Sinhalese language and culture; in fact, in favor of Sinhalese unity for the country. The Senanayake government will find it difficult to resist them.

Ceylon's politics were summed up for me this way by a man I met. "People talk about economic issues," he said, "but they're secondary. Community interest is what people respond to, and if an issue isn't communal someone will make it so to get attention. Communalism is at the heart of nearly everything in Ceylon."

Ceylon's second great difficulty is economic, and this boils down to agricultural production and food. The statistics, for a change, are simple. Roughly 55% of the island's gross national product is accounted for by growing, processing, and transporting agricultural products. (See Wriggins, cited above.) Agriculture occupies more than half the employed population, not counting those in shipping, banking, commerce, etc. whose livelihood also depends on it. Three products--tea, rubber, and coconut--account for 35-40% of the G.N.P. and provide 90-95% of foreign exchange earnings. The Ceylonese are a rice-eating society, yet only slightly more than half the rice consumed is grown in the country. The figures for 1964 were 705,000 tons produced locally and 647,600 tons imported. Most other staple foods are imported as well. It has been estimated that 90% of all curry ingredients, lentils, and dried fish come from abroad. The Ceylonese eats fairly well, at least by Indian standards. A normal meal for the "average" worker, I was told, consists of rice, lentils, dried fish, and, less often, vegetables. Meat is eaten when it can be afforded, not more than once or twice a week for the lower classes. But the fish, lentils, and occasional vegetables (and some fruits like bananas) make for a much more balanced diet than is eaten by most Indians of similar income groups.

Everyone in Ceylon can buy rice at the controlled price of 25 cents (one quarter of a rupee, about five cents in American money) a pound and the "ration" is four pounds per person per week, just over eight ounces a day, ample for even habitual rice eaters. I must emphasize that everyone in Ceylon can do this, even the farmer who grows rice himself. To maintain the low price the government pays a double subsidy. The government pays the farmer more for his rice than it will charge when it sells his rice on the "ration" and it sells imported rice at substantially less than it pays for it in Burma or elsewhere. This subsidy costs the government--and indirectly the country and the people--about 400 million rupees a year, about 20% of the national income, I was told. In addition to the "ration" there is a free market in rice at higher prices

where the affluent can buy as much as they like. There is no compulsory levy on the rice grower by the government. The farmer can sell his rice where he likes. The government has estimated that it buys about 60% of production, but, one rice expert told me, it may not buy so large a percentage because production may be greater than the government thinks. More than two million acres of Ceylon's cultivable land is planted to rubber, tea, and coconuts. About 1.2 million acres are planted with rice. Of these about 600,000 are irrigated land and perhaps 30% of this produces two rice crops a year.

Ceylon has been called one of the more highly industrialized countries of South Asia, but this seems to me very misleading because most of this "industry"--tea factories, rubber mills, and coconut products factories--is really part of agricultural production. There is a great need for "channeling local energies and resources into economical production of a wider variety of finished goods", according to a World Bank report--cited in Wriggins. Industrialization and the production of certain consumer goods, from pots and pans to chocolate bars, has progressed moderately since very inclusive restrictions on imports were imposed several years ago because of the foreign exchange shortage, but this lack of hard currency, coupled with Ceylon's lack of machinery and raw materials, has also prevented industrialization. Ceylon doesn't have either the materials with which to begin to industrialize or the money to import them. There is also a tendency among potential entrepreneurs, according to authorities, to stick to more traditional methods of money-making rather than to strike out in new directions. One last item more or less completes the description of the economic situation. Agricultural commodities like tea and rubber are subject to grave price fluctuations. During the Korean War, for example, rubber prices rose steeply and then fell, cutting down Ceylon's foreign exchange earnings. During the same period, rice prices climbed and the government could not afford to buy the rice, nor could it find adequate supplies elsewhere, such as from American aid. As a result, in 1953 the U.N.P. government concluded an agreement with China whereby China would buy Ceylonese rubber at somewhat better than the world price and sell rice to Ceylon at somewhat below the world price. This agreement is now in its third five-year term. Similar fluctuations could in the future gravely endanger the island's economy, already in an uncomfortable position. The subsidy on imported rice, by the way, dates from the rice crisis of the early fifties; the subsidy to the farmer dates from the mid-forties.

What is to be done to improve the situation? No one I met seems to know, or to know what the government plans to do. The techniques for increasing food production--the most obvious way out of the predicament if it can be done--are well enough known, according to the rice expert I met. Land tenure and the size of holdings is not a problem at present. What is needed, he said, are the goods and services, meaning fertilizer and so on and the administrative machinery to get the fertilizer and advanced agricultural techniques to the peasant. Whether the government will do this remains to be seen. A major obstacle to greatly increased rice production may prove to be the attitude of the peasant. According to some observers the average peasant now grows enough rice and vegetables, has a cow or a buffalo, and is well enough off so that he has little incentive to exert himself to produce more. A second obvious way to improve the financial situation in the country would be to wipe out the subsidies for rice. But everyone I met agreed that this was for the time being impossible, because no government could do so and survive. "The rice subsidy is no longer an economic question," said one man; "it is a political question."

The need for industrialization as well as for a boom in agriculture take on added significance in the light of population growth and the increasing number of educated unemployed. The growth rate of Ceylon's population is reportedly the highest of any Asian country excepting Formosa. Following the virtual elimination of malaria since World War II and improved sanitation and health services (seemingly both of a much higher standard than India's), infant mortality has declined as well as the death rate among the elderly. Prior to 1946 the population growth rate was 1.8% a year; during the last ten years it has been 2.8%. In 1948 the population was seven million; a decade later it was estimated at nine million; and now the rough figure used in conversation is 11 million. Education in Ceylon is free and state supported from primary school through the university level and even into graduate studies. This has been true for some years. At the time of independence in 1948 approximately 50% of the population was estimated to be literate. Ten years later 60% were estimated to be literate, and today the number must be greater. Within another decade or so it is expected that most Ceylonese will be literate and the number of high school and university graduates seeking jobs will be very large. What are they going to do? The government has made agriculture a compulsory subject in all schools, and it hopes to wean graduates away from the belief that they are fit only for white collar jobs. Yet how many more persons can agriculture absorb? The amount of cultivated land is small and already fragmented by inheritance. New land for cultivation must be 'colonized', cleared of jungle, and usually irrigated before it will produce agricultural crops. So it would seem that there must also be a large amount of industry to absorb those who don't turn to the farm. One newspaper editor I talked with believed that in a few years nearly all the unemployed in Ceylon would be educated, unemployed. I was frequently told while there that the frustration of educated, unemployed youths was causing discontent among their parents in the villages and on the land, and that this was becoming an increasingly important force in rural politics.

These issues, and of course many others, are the ingredients of Ceylon politics. And politics on the island are active. The present government, lead by Prime Minister Senanayake, is a coalition of Senanayake's United National Party and two Tamil parties, the Federal Party and the Tamil Congress. Several other groups support the government. The opposition is led by Mrs. Bandaranaike and her Sri Lanka Freedom Party, with the Trotskyite Lanka Sama Samaj Party hanging onto her apron strings. The Communists and a few other dissidents are also in the opposition. In Ceylon, contrary to India, the parliamentary opposition is a real force. Governments are voted out of power with the former opposition, in some combination of parties, taking its place. This makes government more democratic and more responsive to popular sentiment. Should a ruling group become too complacent it is turned out of office, as the U.N.P. was in 1956 and the S.L.F.P. in 1964. Theoretically this should make for better government, and maybe it does. But it also makes governing more difficult, particularly when the population can be swayed to extremes by communal sentiments. And, adding to the difficulty of having a disciplined government, or opposition, group is the tendency of members of parliament to cross the floor, thus perhaps tipping the balance against their former fellows. One newspaper editor has estimated that between 1960 and 1965 some 50 members of parliament had crossed the floor in one direction or the other; that is, one-third of the total membership of the House of Representatives. Mrs. Bandaranaike's government was brought down in December 1964 when several members crossed to the opposition to vote against her. It is in this context that the present government must meet the economic and other problems it faces.

This government will be judged by its effectiveness, according to nearly everyone I met. Whether the person was a leftist and claimed that Senanayake had little deep support among the Sinhalese peasantry or whether the person believed that the Prime Minister was a genuinely popular leader, the conclusion was the same: "If Senanayake can produce results, he'll be (become) a popular leader with support among the common people." If the problems are as they have been outlined here, the chances of satisfactory results seem nearly impossible. But if the communal situation can be kept in hand and if the peasantry can be won over with reforms in rural administration and better distribution of food supplies and simple agricultural implements, improvements said to be much needed, then the government may have the time and the support to tackle the deeper issues, observers believe. The government will have to become associated in the mind of the average voter with a concern for his welfare. Up to now the popular conception of the U.N.P. is of a middle-class party. And one has only to hear the tone of relief in the voice of an upper-middle-class English speaker in Colombo when he talks about the U.N.P. government to understand why. But the middle class is no longer the tail that wags the dog in Ceylon, and unless the U.N.P. moves with the mild socialism that is, it seems to me, the main current of political sentiment in Ceylon (and in the rest of Asia) it will soon be out of power.

Should the present government fail, through its own ineptness, from causes beyond its control, or because of intemperate behavior by the opposition, the future of the country may not be pleasant. The government elected to replace it, many persons predicted to me, will be very far to the left and possibly under the strong influence of communist governments elsewhere. And the new government will be more authoritarian than democratic, they say. This is not a pretty prospect for such a lovely country.

Yours sincerely,



Granville Austin

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