

I

SRI LANKA IN 1948

K. M. DE SILVA

A perceptive observer watching the collapse of European empires in Asia after the Second World War would have been struck by the contrast between the situation in Sri Lanka and in the rest of South Asia including Burma. It could hardly be expected that the transfer of power in the Indian subcontinent would be free of turmoil, but the violence that raged over British India on the eve of independence was on a scale which few but the most pessimistic could have anticipated. The dawn of Indian independence was marred by massacres and migrations in the Punjab on a scale unparalleled in world history in time of peace. There was a similar extension of massacres and migrations in Eastern India. The sub-continent seemed to be on the verge of calamitous civil war.¹ In Burma too the situation was equally fraught with turmoil and conflict. Aung San the youthful leader of Burma's independence struggle did not live to see the signing of the treaty (which he had negotiated) between Britain and Burma on 17 October 1947 which granted Burma her independence; he was assassinated along with a group of his closest associates on 19 June 1947. If the civil war which at one stage seemed India's inevitable fate was avoided through the drastic device of partition, Burma was not so fortunate. There civil war erupted almost from the very first week of the existence of the new Burmese republic.

Sri Lanka in 1948 was, in contrast, an oasis of stability, peace and order. Set against the contemporary catastrophes in the rest of the former British possessions in South Asia, the industrial disputes and the general strike of the years 1945-47 paled into utter insignificance in the scale of violence involved. The transfer of power in Sri Lanka was smooth and peaceful. More importantly one saw very little of the divisions and bitterness which were tearing at the recent independence of the countries in South Asia. Within a few months of independence in 1948 one of the most intractable political issues in the country—the Tamil problem—which had absorbed the energies of its politicians and the British themselves to an inordinate degree since the early nineteen twenties seemed on the way to amicable settlement. G. G. Ponnambalam who had led the Tamils in their political campaigns since his entry into the State Council in 1934 became a member of the Cabinet bringing with him into the government the bulk of the leadership and members of the Tamil Congress. In so doing he helped convert the government into very much a consensus of moderate political opinion in the country.

1. On this see A. Campbell-Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten* (London, 1951); P. Moon, *Divide and Quit* (London, 1962); F. Tucker, *While Memory Serves* (London, 1950).

The final phase in the transfer of power had begun under the leadership of D. S. Senanayake. There are two noteworthy points of interest in his negotiations with Britain on this issue. Firstly, he was guided by a strong belief in ordered constitutional evolution to Dominion Status on the analogy of constitutional development in the White Dominions. In insisting that Dominion Status should remain the prime object of policy, and that this should be attained in association with rather than in opposition to the British, he placed himself in direct opposition to the views adopted by the Ceylon National Congress in 1942 (in response to the younger policy makers who were becoming increasingly influential within it) that independence rather than Dominion Status should be the goal of Sri Lanka's development. Secondly he feared that with the British withdrawal the British empire in Asia in the familiar form in which it had existed would have ended, and that the political prospects in Asia would be hardly encouraging. A profound suspicion of India was the dominant strand in his external policy. Accordingly it was as a policy of re-insurance for the country during the early years of independence when it was not impossible that there might be a political vacuum in South Asia that he viewed the agreements on Defence and External Affairs negotiated by Whitehall as a prelude to the grant of Dominion Status to Sri Lanka.

It was in his internal policy that he left the impress of his dominant personality and his moderate views. The guiding principles were: the conception of Sri Lanka as a multi-racial democracy; and his commitment to the maintenance of the Liberal ideal of a secular state in which the lines between state power and religion were scrupulously demarcated. Here again he placed himself in opposition to an increasingly influential current of opinion which viewed the Sri Lanka polity as being essentially Sinhalese and Buddhist in character, and which urged that government policies should be fashioned to accommodate a far-reaching transformation of the island's politics to build a new Sri Lanka on traditional, ideal, Sinhala-Buddhist lines. Implicit in this was a rejection of the concept of a multi-racial polity, as well as the concept of a secular state.

D. S. Senanayake, in contrast, was sensitive to minority anxieties. This was not merely a matter of political realism but also sprang from a deep conviction of the need for generous concessions to the minorities, ethnic, communal and religious, to ensure political stability in a plural society such as Sri Lanka in the vital last phase in the transfer of power. An analysis of his response to the political implications of minority anxieties on Sri Lanka's development as an independent state needs much more space than is available in a very brief introductory chapter such as this. One needs to draw attention, briefly, to at least three points of interest.

Firstly, there were the guarantees against legislation discriminating against minorities, incorporated in the Soulbury Constitution. These guarantees had been borrowed from provisions in the Ministers' Draft Constitution of 1944 which had been introduced on D. S. Senanayake's initiative as a gesture of generosity and re-assurance to the minorities. In retrospect it would seem that the rights of minorities had not received adequate protection in the Soulbury Constitution, but in 1946-7 the constitutional guarantees against discriminatory legislation seemed sufficiently reassuring to them largely because of the trust and confidence they had in D. S. Senanayake.

Secondly, there was the initiative he took in forming the United National Party. This was designed to make a fresh start in politics in the direction of a consensus of moderate opinion in national politics; it was to be a political party necessarily representative of the majority community but at the same time acceptable to the minorities. His own standing in the country was sufficient guarantee of its being acceptable to the majority, but there is no doubt that its position among the Sinhalese was strengthened by S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's decision to bring in his Sinhala Maha Sabha. From the beginning it had the enthusiastic approval of the small but influential Christian minority, and the Muslims who had in the past given substantial support to the Tamils in their political campaigns at last broke away and sought association with the new party. When the Tamil Congress crossed over to the government in 1948 the equilibrium of political forces which D. S. Senanayake had sought to establish was stabilised at a level which he found acceptable, even though the Tamil Congress did not lose its separate identity and despite the fact that a section broke away from it into a stubborn but, at that time, seemingly futile opposition. Only the Indian community, consisting in the main of plantation workers, were left out. But there were special reasons for that, for they were regarded as an unassimilated group without roots in the country. The decision to leave them out was deliberately taken on that account. To the extent that he shared the attitudes and prejudices of the great majority of Sinhalese politicians with regard to the Indian question,—the status of Indian plantation workers in the Sri Lanka polity, and more specifically to deny them unrestricted rights to the franchise—his conception of a multi-racial polity was flawed.

Thirdly, D. S. Senanayake thwarted all efforts to abandon the concept of a secular state, and the principle of the religious neutrality of the state. He succeeded in this to the extent that in 1948, despite some Buddhist displeasure over the continued prestigious and influential position enjoyed by the Christians, there seemed little or no evidence of the religious turmoil and linguistic conflicts that were to burst to the surface in 1956.

If the political leadership in Sri Lanka took pride in the smoothness of the transfer of power, they seemed oblivious to the political perils involved in making the process so bland as to be virtually imperceptible to those not directly involved. The last British governor of the island became the island's first Governor-General after independence. Next there was the notable difference between the constitutional and legal instruments which conferred independence on Sri Lanka, and the cognate process in other parts of South Asia—for India and Pakistan, Acts of Parliament; for Burma, a specially negotiated treaty; for Sri Lanka, a mere Order-in-Council. All this seemed to suggest a qualitative difference in the nature of the independence that was being achieved when no meaningful difference in status was either intended by Britain or accepted by Sri Lanka's leaders, in the Board of Ministers first of all, and later, in the Cabinet.² There was also the fact that the constitution under which

2. Independence did not carry the lingering connotation of constitutional subordination to Britain which Dominion Status, at this time, appeared to have. India's acceptance of membership of the Commonwealth went a long way to demonstrate that Dominion Status was in fact complete independence with the advantages of membership of a world-wide Commonwealth.

the new Dominion began its political existence was of British origin in contrast to the autochthonous constitution drafted for the Indian Republic by a Constituent Assembly. Once again there was an element of exaggeration in the criticism, for the new constitution of Sri Lanka was basically the one drafted for D. S. Senanayake by his advisers in 1944—and approved subsequently by the State Council—modified to suit the needs of the changed circumstances of 1946-7. And these modifications were few and not very substantial or significant. Above all the Agreements on Defence and External Affairs negotiated prior to the transfer of power helped to give an air of credibility to the argument that the independence conferred on Sri Lanka was flawed. The Agreements themselves were regarded as badges of inferiority, and checks on full sovereignty in external affairs; moreover fears were expressed about secret clauses not divulged or a secret treaty even more detrimental to the island's status as an independent nation. Events were to prove that these fears and suspicions were without foundation in fact, and certainly that no secret undertakings had been given by Sri Lanka in 1947-8, but until 1956-7 suspicion persisted and could be used by critics of the UNP and the constitution.

Thus the real worth of D. S. Senanayake's achievement came to be denied because the means adopted for the attainment of independence under his leadership were not as robust and as dramatic as they might have been. By laying so much stress on the decorous and peaceful processes of constitutional agitation the Board of Ministers had deprived themselves, perhaps consciously, of the opportunities of exploring the numerous chances they had of making a more emotional and vigorous commitment to nationalism. Left-wing critics of the government were able to argue that the independence achieved in 1947-8 was 'spurious'. The gibe of 'fake' independence which they kept hurling at the government evoked a positive response from a wider circle of the political nation than merely the left wing alone, largely because the Indian experience seemed to provide a more emotionally satisfying example than the process by which power had been transferred in Sri Lanka—*independence granted from above* (as Sri Lanka) was regarded as being much less satisfying to the spirit of nationalism than if it has been won after prolonged strife and untiring sacrifice.

As regards the economy, much more so than with the political structure, the mood of the day was singularly sober and realistic though not unduly pessimistic. There were, on the contrary, high hopes for economic achievement. For the country's assets were not unimpressive: though the population was increasing rapidly, it was compared with that in other countries in South Asia, well fed and literate; the government of Sri Lanka was the largest landholder in the country, controlling no less than 3.25 million acres of land (the bulk of this land was waste forest and required the provision of roads and electricity to be rendered productive); the administration was competent, and the island was well equipped with social and economic overheads; above all, there were the large sterling balances accumulated during the war.

Nevertheless the economic legacy left behind by the British was just as ambiguous, and perhaps even more so, than the political. The crux of the problem was that foreign income which "directly or indirectly constituted the bulk of the national income began to fall rapidly" while there was a rise in the cost of imports. This was

reflected in the country's balance of payment which fell consistently from "a handsome surplus in 1945 to a heavy deficit in 1947". For a country which practically lives by foreign trade, an authoritative contemporary economic survey pointed out, "no economic indices could be more significant. It represented a fall in national income and a march towards greater poverty and insecurity".³

D. S. Senanayake's government inherited an undiversified export economy dependent principally on three crops, tea (which in terms of export earnings was the most important) rubber and coconut. The weakness of the economy lay in the fact that the revenue from these exports was subject to wide fluctuations, a reflex of world economic conditions. This was quite apart from the fact that foreign commercial firms—largely British—had a dominant controlling position in the plantations especially tea and rubber, and in the export of plantation products.

One of the most striking features of this economic structure was the absence of an industrial sector independent of the processing of tea, rubber and coconut for export, and the engineering and mechanical requirements of these processes. Nevertheless there had been since 1931, and more particularly since the outbreak of the Second World War, some state sponsored industrial ventures. None of these proved to be of more than marginal significance, and on the whole little progress had been made. Private enterprise was reluctant to embark on industrial ventures in the absence of firm support from the government. Though the new government declared that the country cannot "depend on agriculture alone to provide the minimum standard we are aiming at for our rapidly increasing people" this was merely lip-service to the almost religious faith among the intelligentsia in industrialisation as the panacea for Sri Lanka's economic problems.

Traditional agriculture—subsistence farming—lagged far behind the efficient plantation sector in productivity due to the long-term impact of a multiplicity of factors. Sri Lanka could not produce rice needed to feed a growing population: the bulk of the country's requirements in rice and subsidiary foodstuffs was imported and accounted for more than half the imports.

Looking ahead in the years after independence the Senanayake regime placed its hopes on the achievement of self-sufficiency in rice and subsidiary food-stuffs; "...increased production particularly in the matter of homegrown food", it declared, "will be given a place of supreme importance in the policy of the Government..."⁴ The principal means of achieving this objective was the rapid development of the dry zone, the heartland of the ancient irrigation civilization of Sri Lanka. Thus in this enterprise one discerned too the search for inspiration from the past and the traditional sources of legitimacy of Sri Lanka's rulers.

All in all, there was no great emphasis on far-reaching changes in the economic structure inherited from the British. This latter had taken firm root in the period of British rule, and the process of introducing changes in it was more difficult

3. B. B. Das Gupta, *A Short Economic Survey of Ceylon* (Colombo, 1949).

4. Quoted in H. M. Oliver, *Economic Opinion and Policy in Ceylon* (Duke University Press, Durham N. C., 1957), p. 50.

than it seemed, while any hope of dismantling it was beyond the realms of practical politics. For "the export of estate products enabled the people of [Sri Lanka], or a large part of them, to be fed and clothed.....". Besides the system itself was still viable and its potential for expansion was, if not undiminished, at least reasonably good. And it was also true that the political leadership of the day was reluctant to make changes in an economic system with which their own interests were identified. The result was that in the economic structure, as in the political, there was an emphasis on the maintenance of the *status quo*.

There were other problems as well, and of these much the most important was the rapidity with which population was expanding. A knowledgeable commentator on the country's affairs warned the country in 1949 of the economic implications of the fact that the island's rate of natural increase of population had reached "the astonishing rate of about 3.3. per cent per annum". "There can be no doubt" he added "that this is the fundamental problem of the economy of [Sri Lanka]...."⁶

In the general elections of 1947 left-wing parties made substantial if not spectacular gains, and held between themselves and their fellow-travellers about a fourth of the elected seats. Earlier they had organised a series of major strikes culminating in the general strike of 1947. These strikes had been the most noteworthy demonstrations of solidarity of the working class and white collar workers up to that time. The strikes were as much political demonstrations as they were trades disputes—one of the main demands was the rejection of the Soulbury Constitution. The strife generated by these strikes served the purpose of underlining the difference in approach between two concepts of nationalism. The "moderates" had come into their inheritance, and the "radicals"—in the sense of the left-wing—had demonstrated their determination to deprive them of it. They had taken a stand against the Soulbury Constitution, and they dismissed the grant of independence in February 1948 as a cynical deal between the Imperial power and their pliant agents in Sri Lanka to preserve the old order in the guise of independence.

Though the Board of Ministers had been constrained to treat the strikes of 1945-47, and in particular, the general strike of 1947 as a serious bid for political power by Marxists, they soon realized that the challenge from the left wing had been needlessly exaggerated, and that they were by no means a threat to the country's political stability. While the social order was under increasing pressure from a politicized urban working class and white collar workers, the peasantry was a stable element and D. S. Senanayake sought to meet the left wing challenge by the operation of a socio-economic policy which assumed if not an identity of interests between the governing *elite* and the peasantry, at least a potentially harmonious working relationship between two conservative social groups. In the early years of independence this policy was proving to be increasingly successful. Secondly, the social welfare schemes of the Donoughmore era were continued beyond 1947 as a means of blunting the challenge of the Marxist left. Sri Lanka, poor though she was, enjoyed a much

5. W. I. Jennings, *The Economy of Ceylon* (O.U.P., 2nd ed., 1951) p. 40.

6. *ibid.*, p. 4.

higher standard of living than India, Pakistan and Burma and the national finances seemed adequate to maintain the welfare measures to which the country had grown accustomed in the last years of British rule. In 1947 the total expenditure on welfare absorbed 56.1% of the government's resources; the corresponding figure for the late nineteen twenties has been a mere 16.4%. It was not yet evident that the burgeoning costs of these welfare measures were an unsupportable burden for a developing country and one which "added a dimension of weakness to an economy whose principal feature was its dependence on the vagaries of a world market."⁷

Ironically, however, neither of the protagonists—the government led by D. S. Senanayake, nor its left-wing critics—showed much understanding of the sense of outrage and indignation of the Buddhists at what they regarded as the historic injustices suffered by their religion under western rule. The affront was to culture no less than to religion, and the resentment was felt even more strongly by the *ayurvedic* physician, the Sinhala school master and the notary than by the *bhikkhus*. And as regards religion it was the withdrawal of the traditional patronage and consequent precedence and prestige that was resented. Beneath the surface these religious, cultural and linguistic issues were gathering momentum and developing into a force too powerful for the existing social and political set-up to accommodate or absorb. They were to tear the country apart within a decade of 1948 and accomplish the discomfiture of both the U.N.P. and its left-wing critics.

7. L. A. Wickremeratne, 'The Emergence of a Welfare Policy, 1931-1948, in K. M. de Silva (ed) *The University of Ceylon. History of Ceylon* (Colombo, 1973).

CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR
THE UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON *HISTORY OF CEYLON*.
VOLUME THREE

"... as authoritative and definitive a history of Modern Ceylon as one is likely to have for a long time".

"... an excellent piece of editorship, a remarkable effort at co-ordination by all concerned.

Professor S. Arasaratnam in *Modern Ceylon Studies*.

"From many points of view... the standards reached in Volume 3 are considerably more advanced than those in Volume I... K. M. de Silva, his Colleagues in the Editorial Board and his co-contributors to this volume have done excellent work."

Times Literary Supplement.