

The Causes of Communal Conflict in Ceylon

COMMUNALISM is a disease which afflicts the body politic in India and Ceylon. It is one of the main obstacles to the attainment of self-government in both these countries. Arguments are advanced in favour of and against it, and remedies are suggested for its eradication. But few persons have tried to understand the root causes of this ailment. Most persons have their own explanations. Some trace it to caste, race and religious distinctions. Some consider it a creation of crafty politicians or of an unscrupulous British Government. There is no doubt communal divisions usually coincide with caste, race and religious groups. It cannot be denied that communalism will not be so acute if there were no foreign government to take advantage of these divisions or no local politicians to exploit them to maintain themselves in power. But the reasons for the existence of divisions or the presence of a few who exploit them are not necessarily the root causes of the conflict. Others get nearer the truth when they attribute communalism to economic causes especially the struggle to secure Government and other appointments. An attempt is made in this article to examine the communal conflict in the light of recent historical developments. These reveal that communalism in its modern form is a very recent development. It came

into existence as a result of the rise of the Middle Class, and the conflicts are mainly due to a struggle within the Middle Class itself for the spoils won from the British through the recent constitutional reforms.

What is Communalism? Ceylon during the last one hundred and fifty years has developed more or less into a nation state. It went through a political unification in 1815 when the British occupied the Kandyan Kingdom. It has gone through an administrative unification as a result of the adoption of a uniform system of government for the whole island. It has further gone through an economic unification. The roads, the railway and the telegraph have broken down the isolation of the various villages and districts while trade has linked the interests of the various parts of the island. These changes have in turn so knit together the interests of the various communities that today no community can act independently. Ceylon cannot again be divided into three separate divisions of the Low-country Sinhalese, the Kandyan and the Tamil districts. But though the country has been unified in the ways already mentioned, the people have not grown into a Ceylonese nation sufficiently cohesive, for instance like the British nation consisting of the English, the Scots and the Welsh. They consist of a number of communities among whom there is very little intermarriage such as the Sinhalese, Low-country and Kandyan, the Tamils, the Muslims and the Burghers. To these may be added the major and minor caste groups of at least the Sinhalese urban areas. Though the interests of these groups are linked together and their welfare depends on the advance of the country as a whole, the members of these groups often place the interests of their own community before those of the people as a whole creating communal conflicts and hindering national progress. One of the most urgent needs today is to reconcile these conflicting interests and to do this it is first of all necessary to understand the causes of the conflict.

That communalism of the type we see today is a recent development is supported by the history of Ceylon. European writers such as the Portuguese Jesuit Fernão de Queyroz, the Englishman Robert Knox, the Dutch Governors, James Cordiner and other English writers of the nineteenth century have left us pictures of Ceylon with its various divisions of society, but in none of their writings does one come across a communal conflict of the modern type.

The Sinhalese-Tamil problem which is the most acute today can hardly be traced back even to the last century. Before the tenth century, A.D. there is no evidence of any serious difference between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Up to that time the Tamil immigrants seem to have intermarried with the Sinhalese, as they do today in the Sinhalese coastal districts, and gradually merged themselves in the Sinhalese population. After the Cola occupation of Ceylon in the eleventh century they appear to have come in larger numbers and formed a fairly powerful body in the northern part of the island. And when Māgha of Kālinga at the beginning of the thirteenth

century established an independent kingdom in the north, it developed into a Tamil Kingdom.

The centres of Sinhalese civilization at this time, partly owing to South Indian invasions, began to drift from the Dry Zone, first to the north-west, then to the highlands and finally to the south-west of the island. Thus the Sinhalese and the Tamils became divided by territory, one occupying the Wet Zone and the other the Dry Zone, by language, one speaking Sinhalese and the other Tamil, and by religion, one following mainly Buddhism and the other Hinduism. But there arose no conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamil peoples. It is true that Sinhalese and Tamil kings waged war for the possession of their kingdoms, but the Sinhalese and the Tamil peoples as a whole were united on their agricultural activities, each race trying to eke out an existence for itself.

The same is true of the Kandyan Sinhalese and the Low-country Sinhalese. Before the seventeenth century there was little or no difference between these two groups, but during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries the contact with the West transformed to some extent the conditions in the Maritime Provinces while hardly any change took place in the highlands where the Kandyan rulers tried to exclude their people from all foreign influences. But during these centuries there was hardly any friction among the two peoples, and even when the British occupied the Kandyan provinces and gradually developed a common system of administration for the whole island, there arose no conflict as the people of each region found that their interests did not clash with those of the other.

The position of the Muslims is somewhat different, but they too hardly ever came into conflict with the other communities in the nineteenth century. The Muslims consist of Moors most of whom are of Indian origin and Malays who have come from the East Indies. Most of the Moors are today either agriculturists or traders. They were at first mainly traders, but a large section of them settled in the Batticaloa district as agriculturists when the Portuguese expelled them from their territory. The rest since the British occupation have carried on their trade with little competition or opposition from the other races of the island. The Malays were soldiers under the Dutch and served in the same capacity under the British till the Ceylon Rifles was disbanded. Since then they have either entered the Police Force or taken to other occupations.

The Burghers differ from the other permanent inhabitants of the island owing to their European origin. The occupation of Ceylon by the British gave them a definite advantage over the other races, and they held high posts under the Government and rendered eminent service as doctors, lawyers and teachers. During the nineteenth century they worked together with the other communities and they led most Ceylonese movements and played an important part in the political life of the country.

In the nineteenth century there was a certain amount of conflict in this country. The Sinhalese chiefs at first opposed the British and the Government gradually crushed their power. Later they accepted their subordinate position and gradually became supporters of British rule. During the later period the conflict was again between the rulers and the ruled especially between the European unofficials and the British Government. But there was little or no conflict among the various communities, and they generally lived in harmony.

Why do these communities then no longer live in the same manner? Why do they, whenever constitutional issues are raised, not sink for the common good their interests which clash with those of the others? To answer these questions it is necessary to go back to past history once more. At the time of the British occupation, this island was a land of villages more or less self-contained, and the chief occupation of the people was the cultivation of paddy which they grew for their own consumption. Society was co-operative and static. The life of the people was based on ideas of caste, and they did not ordinarily expect to change the position to which they were born during the course of this life. The system of Government was feudal, and its work was carried on with the services performed by the people each according to his caste.

The British Government from the beginning of its rule did not approve of this social system or the form of government which gave little opportunity for commerce and left no room for the mobility of labour. Anxious to develop the resources of the island, it abolished *rajakāriya* in 1832, breaking down the ancient co-operative feudalism in which each man had his niche according to his occupation, and prepared the way for the development of the present competitive commercial age by leaving every man to choose whatever occupation he liked irrespective of his caste. It next began to place society on a commercial basis. In order to increase the revenue of the country, it encouraged the establishment of plantations. It sold Crown lands at a nominal rate, exempted plantations from the land tax, and used most of the revenue derived from the sale of land in constructing roads to the plantations.

These changes not only brought European capital and European planters into this country but also brought about an important change in the social system. At the time of the British occupation the society of Ceylon consisted mainly of two classes: the ruling class of the officials of the Court and the rulers of the districts and the working class of agricultural peasants and craftsmen. There were few traders as trade was mainly a Government monopoly. The British by their reforms brought into existence a new class between these two groups, the present Middle Class.

The establishment of the plantations provided new avenues of work for the people of the country. The clearing of the jungles and the construction of mills and factories gave employment to skilled and unskilled labourers

well as to contractors. The plantations did not produce food for their workers, and it had to be brought from Colombo and elsewhere. The products of the plantations had to be sent to Colombo for export to England and other countries. This involved a great deal of work and provided employment for hundreds of transport agents. Food, clothing and other necessaries had to be supplied to those who worked in the plantations, and small towns with boutiques and shops arose in plantation areas. Colombo developed into a commercial city providing work for all types of people. Those who accumulated wealth by taking to these new enterprises and other new occupations began to open up or buy estates, and gradually a small proportion of the tea estates, more than half the rubber estates and most of the coconut estates came to be owned by Ceylonese.

The new system of administration created by the British required a large number of Government servants. To satisfy this demand, the Government established English schools and gradually a large number of persons from all races and castes, though in unequal proportions, found employment in the Government services. In 1833 the British Government established a system of law-courts throughout the island bringing all people from the Governor downwards under a common system of law. The establishment of these courts led to a demand for lawyers and the changes in social and economic conditions gave employment to large numbers.

Up to 1869 education in Ceylon was conducted mainly by the Missions at their own expense. In that year the British Government accepted responsibility for vernacular education and agreed to give grants to Mission schools. This led to an increase of English schools and a large teaching profession gradually came into existence. The rise of towns and the development of estates led to a demand for doctors trained on modern lines to look after the sanitation of these places and the health of the people who lived in them. These and other causes led to the establishment of the Medical College and the development of the medical profession.

Thus arose the new Middle Class consisting of planters, merchants, transport agents, lawyers, doctors, teachers and Government servants, and they soon found that though they formed the most influential part of the community they had very little political power. In the country districts the descendants of the ancient ruling families still carried on the Government while in the urban areas in which they lived all the high administrative posts with a few exceptions were in the hands of the British.

The new Middle Class in order to acquire power did not plan to rise in rebellion against the British like the Sinhalese chiefs. They were educated in English and knew how the British Middle Class came into power. They had before them the example of the European unofficials who tried to gain control of the Government by securing an unofficial majority in the Legislative Council. They too began to agitate for a reform of the Legislative Council

so that they might have a share in the control of the Government. In 1912 they gained a few concessions and in the time of Sir William Manning they obtained an unofficial majority and exercised a certain amount of influence over the Government. In short the Middle Class gained a considerable amount of political power which they exercised through the State Council and the local self-governing institutions. They captured most of the high posts in the Government which were once almost exclusively held by the British.

The Middle Class differed from all other groups. It crossed all existing groups drawing its members from all of them. It ignored the foundations on which all other groups rested and based itself on differences of wealth and enlightenment. Its members united for various purposes especially to safeguard and develop its interests. But they did not break away from the existing divisions and did not develop into a separate community as there was yet very little intermarriage among the various groups. And now with the accession to power, the various sections of the Middle Class instead of uniting further began to compete with one another.

This struggle within the Middle Class itself is explained in various ways. Some point out that it is due to the fact that the demand for territorial electorates by the Ceylon National Congress, though justifiable on the ground that they alone satisfy a modern state, led to much misgiving. The minority leaders feared that they would have little chance of being chosen by a general electorate while the Tamils feared that it would lead to a reduction of the proportion of their members. Some point out that it is due to the fact that the growth of national feeling, which arose as a result of the unification of the island and grew in strength with the opposition to British rule, led to a revival of the ancient cultures which instead of uniting the various communities divided them. Others attribute communalism to psychological factors. They point out that some of the Burghers are so communal because they fear that the growth of a Ceylonese nation would lead to their own extinction as a community. Some of the Sinhalese would not be so keen to preserve their civilization and culture if they had no fear that they would be swamped by Indians or that world forces were too strong for the survival of a small community like theirs. There is, no doubt, some truth in all these statements. But the attempt to preserve and develop ancient cultures need not necessarily lead to conflicts. In fact such efforts should receive every encouragement as they would help to enrich the culture of the nation as a whole.

But the chief reason for the present conflicts seems to be that the various sections of the Middle Class soon realized that the spoils won from the British were insufficient to satisfy all groups. The number of places in the Legislative Council and the local bodies were limited and the posts in the Government and other services were insufficient to meet their growing needs. The result was that they began to struggle among themselves and sought the aid of their respective communities to attain their ends. This was not difficult as the

communities had not attained the same stage of development. Some backward educationally while others had not the same economic advancement. These inequalities helped to sharpen communal feelings and to develop a stronger sense of group solidarity in those communities whose members felt they had an inadequate share of the spoils.

The Low-country Sinhalese found opportunities for advancement at their doors. They acquired wealth as businessmen, contractors, transport planters and proprietors of estates. They took advantage of the English schools opened by the Christian Missions and other religious bodies and took to Government posts and the legal, the medical and the teaching professions.

The Tamils living in the Dry Zone could benefit little by the planting enterprise. Hence there was not much economic change in their area and they changed little socially. They were slow to give up their caste ideas and did not take to crafts and trade. But a considerable number, especially those of the advanced castes, took advantage of the 'English education' provided by the Missions and entered Government service and the professions. As the places for lawyers, doctors and teachers were limited they began to concentrate on Government appointments.

The Kandyans who were deeply attached to their village economy, feudal ways of life and caste ideas had neither the capital nor the necessary education to take sufficient advantage of the new enterprises though they arose within their own territories. Education spread slowly among them as the Government left it chiefly to the Missions. The Missions at first established themselves mainly in the areas where the Dutch had already been at work, and paid little attention to the Kandyan districts. Thus, when the plantations were opened, it was the Low-country Sinhalese who flocked into the highlands as carpenters, masons, contractors, transport agents and traders. The result is that today it is the Low-country Sinhalese and not the Kandyans who are the most influential in the urban areas of the Kandyan districts. In fact the Kandyan advance has been so slow that there is yet no powerful Kandyan Middle Class and their representatives in the State Council, unlike those of the Low-country Sinhalese and the Tamils, are drawn mainly from the old ruling families. That the Kandyan Middle Class has developed only recently is also seen from the fact that the Kandyan nationalist movement is mainly a youth movement.

The position of the Moors is not very different from that of the Kandyans. It is true that those who were traders found at first plenty of opportunity for extending their old pursuits. But owing to their attachment to their religion and their social conservatism not many attended the English Mission schools. The result was that few could take advantage of the new opportunities in trade or secure positions in other walks of life. And they, like the Kandyans, feel that they have been left behind by the other communities.

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

The Burghers though small in number are an influential community as they are almost exclusively a Middle Class body. Their main object today is to avoid a complete loss of that position to which they attained before other communities entered into serious competition with them.

The position of the different castes is not very different. It is not possible in this article to show how they have abandoned at least in the Sinhalese urban and suburban areas their old foundations and have changed into communal groups. Some castes owing to the privileged or the advantageous position they held at the time of the British occupation were able to benefit more than the others by the new changes. Today their progress varies and the Middle Classes of those communities who have been left behind are struggling to keep pace with those of other communities who had got ahead of them.

When the Donoughmore Commission arrived in Ceylon to deal with the question of constitutional reforms the communal claims were placed before them. But the Commissioners showed little sympathy with these demands. They no doubt realized that communal representation would only impair that unity given to Ceylon by over a century of British rule. The Earl of Donoughmore who accompanied Montagu in his Mission to India and took part in the discussions on constitutional reforms knew how difficult it was to abolish special electorates once they are granted. The Commission recommended exclusively territorial electorates and the grant of the franchise to all men and women of a certain age. In other words they did not concern themselves with the division of the spoils won from the British. They showed greater interest in the uplift of the masses who had little interest in communal squabbles that had developed in the body of the Middle Class.

But the Middle Classes did not give up the struggle. They found that with the grant of the universal franchise the ultimate power lay with the masses. They realized that the racial groups that formed the masses were not hostile to one another as the causes of conflict enumerated above did not operate among them. But they knew that they were communal for other reasons. The masses were not influenced to the same extent by the new economic and social forces that brought together the various sections of the Middle Class and gave them a common outlook. The Middle Classes now began to exploit this latent feeling of community and caste and spread their conflicts and jealousies among them for the attainment of their objects.

The exploitation of this communal feeling is most apparent in the struggles of the Middle Class for the attainment of power and status, especially at elections to the State Council and the local bodies. But it is not many who can be members of the State Council and the local bodies and the interest in their rise cannot extend to a very large circle. The conflict in reality is due much more to appointments in the Government and other services and it is in the securing of these posts that communalism is most exploited.

VITALISM AND BECOMING: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Lord Morley¹ dealing with Indian constitutional reforms wrote to Lord Curzon: "I half suspect what they (Indians) really want a million times beyond political reforms is access to the higher administrative posts of all sorts, though they are alive to the inseparable connection between the two." Another well-known authority² has pointed out that the Hindu-Muslim problem in its modern form emerged first in connection with the demand for simultaneous examinations for the Indian Civil Service in England and India. The Muslims realized that such a change would not benefit them and refused to take part in the agitation.

It is not maintained that there are no communal conflicts at all among the masses. Such a conflict was seen not long ago between the Indian and the Ceylonese workers. It is also not suggested that communal conflicts are due to economic causes alone. Recent history has shown that the British helped to change the society of Ceylon from a co-operative and feudal into a competitive and commercial basis. The changes effected led to the rise of the Middle Class, but it did not develop into a separate community. The various sections of this class soon realized that the Government and other posts were insufficient to satisfy their growing needs, and began to compete with one another. And in order to achieve their ends they sought the aid of their respective communities and transformed their individual conflicts into a communal conflict. Thus communalism is essentially a Middle Class problem and the chief causes of conflict are economic.

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1. Morley, *Recollections*, Vol. II, p. 182.

2. H. H. Dodwell, *India*, Part II, p. 203.