
Sri Lanka: SWRD Bandaranaike - a unique statesman

Friday, 26 September 2008

Last Updated Wednesday, 01 October 2008

by: Dr. Tilak S. Fernando REMEMBERED: On September 26 1959, Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike was assassinated in cold blood, by a person clad in yellow robes. Bandaranaike had an enlightened philosophy, the full realisation of which suffered certain setbacks. SWRD Bandaranaike was educated at Oxford, UK, according to his father's wish. Solomon Dias Bandaranaike was determined that his son graduated from one of the best seats of learning in the world and the result was, he was 'packed up' into a ship to England to study at the Oxford University. As an undergraduate at Oxford University in the UK, he viewed the Asians at the English universities as a long-dragged and an urgent problem. In one of his writings to an Oxford magazine, for which he became famous, he considered it as a problem with many aspects. While Royal Commission dealt with this problem at the time and university professors, Anglo-Indians wrote articles about it in newspapers, many others with or without knowledge of the subject gave their opinion on the matter.

A student himself, SWRD Bandaranaike's point of view as a student who finished his course at Oxford was: "There are those who come here to take up some qualifying examinations, such as the I.C.S., or go through a course, such as that of Forestry, at Oxford or Cambridge, which make their sojourn in this country imperative. About these, there can be no question of the desirability or otherwise of their coming here. But there are a great many - certainly the majority of those who do come to this country - who are under no such constraint. They come to the English Universities, as the average English public school does, for the advantage of a University training, to put a final finish and polish, as it were, to their education to take up at Oxford, the B.A. degree in some School, who after getting a moderate second class at best, return home, being in some cases, called to the Bar in the meantime. Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike (January 8, 1899 – September 26, 1959) the 04th Prime Minister (1956-1959) of Sri Lanka To these people, the mere fact of having the degree of B.A. (Oxon) or having passed the Bar exams, cannot be of much use. They could probably have taken up corresponding examinations at home, and in some cases, of more practical use too". Delving into the past political history in Sri Lanka, one could follow the developments which moulded SWRD Bandaranaike to be an enlightened statesman. The dawn of Independence, on February 4, 1948 did not usher in true independence to 'Ceylon' since the commanding heights of the economy and the bureaucracy in the judiciary, and the administration of the country perpetuated a colonial culture. Being a Minister of the D. S. Senanayake Cabinet and a member of his United National Party, SWRD Bandaranaike proposed certain changes. These proposals in the form of resolutions were debated at the Madampe sessions of the UNP conference in June 1951. Such proposals were aimed at ushering changes to establish the just aspirations of the Sinhalese who have had a raw deal during the colonial era. SWRD proposed these changes with a sincere conviction, without harbouring plans to achieve political power. What he wanted was to bring about three changes without leaving the UNP, of which he was a key founder member. This action was testimony to his statesmanship, which his critics have overlooked and have condemned him as an 'ambitious politician who was out to grab power'. When his resolutions were thrown out at Madampe sessions, SWRD Bandaranaike resigned from the UNP and the Cabinet on July 17, 1951. Subsequently this paved the way to build the new political philosophy and the SLFP was born to give expression to that creed. After a few years of campaigning, SWRD Bandaranaike was able to weld a united organisation comprising the progressive elements of the political spectrum but with a nationalist hue to contest the 1956 General Elections. This organisation, MEP (Mahajana Eksath Peramuna) was supported by the Buddhist Commission whose slogans of discrimination against the Sinhalese by 400 years of Christian rule and unremedied by eight years of the UNP rule had an impact on the electorate. The result was the sweeping victory of 1956 which was a path-breaking one. "The Sinhala Only Act," which was the flagship of the new government's political programme became one of the foremost Bills to go through Parliament with a provision for reasonable use of Tamil. It also enacted procedures for those officials who were not proficient or prepared to work in Sinhala to retire with enhanced pensions. It is regrettable, yet relevant, to state that during this stage even some Sinhalese officers made use of these procedures to retire rather than work in Sinhala medium. By making compensatory provision for those officials who were likely to be adversely affected by changes flowing from the enactment of the Sinhala Only Act, SWRD Bandaranaike was able to provide relief and prove his compassionate approach - a key feature of enlightened statesmanship. An interesting episode to illustrate SWRD's compassionate nature and to strengthen his credentials as a true statesman was the way he treated Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, The Governor General of Sri Lanka, after the UNP defeat in 1956. The Leftist parties who were in the opposition at the time were dismayed that Sir Oliver was retained as Governor General and, a cut in the vote for Governor General's salary and establishment was moved in August 1956. At this moment SWRD Bandaranaike, with great dignity replied, "It is only fair on my part to state that His Excellency, The Governor General, has placed his knowledge, experience and constitutional powers at the full disposal of the present Government, and as constitutionally proper, been most helpful to the Government. He acted in a very constitutional manner and the government has received great assistance from him on many pressing problems". Finally, the move to reduce Governor General's allowances and salary was rejected. The way SWRD Bandaranaike handled the abrogation of the 1947 Defence Agreement with the UK and the take-over of the Naval Base at Trincomalee and Katunayake Air Base speaks volumes for his achievement. He was able to negotiate in a civilised and effective manner without antagonising the British and maintaining cordial relations simultaneously. To hail SWRD Bandaranaike as a great statesman and reinforce the view that he was able to see far ahead could be gleaned from the way he forged the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact with the aim of achieving a JUST settlement of the Tamil separatist question. The pact was a well thought-out diplomatic move and satisfied the Tamil nationalist aspirations, which would on hindsight have prevented extremist terrorist groups such as the LTTE springing up to claim a separate unitary state. The Pact had to be abandoned due to Sinhala chauvinistic groups who labelled it as a "sell-out" to the Tamils! They were so short-sighted to foresee that such a settlement would have

stopped extremist, separatist Tamil groups in their tracks spawning terror, death and destruction and destroying the democratic beliefs of the country. SWRD Bandaranaike had the vision and Chelvanayakam the prudence to agree in order to avoid future developments of an extreme revolutionary nature. Had the 'B-C Pact' been implemented, it would have served as a solid base to build on, to solve the other related ethnic problems and would have immensely contributed to a just and peaceful settlement. The developments that took place after the abandonment of the Pact led to the TULF adopting a militant approach which increased its intransigence in dealing with the subsequent governments. It is a tragedy that such a situation had to develop, and today, as a result, Sri Lanka is paying a heavy price in experiencing the most intractable problem in the North and East. SWRD Bandaranaike's other claims to earn the coveted crown of a true statesman was the way he had to solve the problems of recurrent strikes fomented by the extreme left-wing elements in the Port of Colombo to undermine the new government. The approach he adopted to stand up to certain individuals in his own party, whose aim was to further their business interests, was with fortitude and courage. But in the process, he became the unfortunate victim of those unscrupulous elements in his own party. The greatness of SWRD Bandaranaike's statesmanship lay in the courage of his convictions to restore to the ordinary people of rural areas, opportunities to better themselves by way of easy access to employment, which was denied to them in the past, due to a lack of an English education. By fostering a sense of national identity, as expressed by the adoption of Sinhala as the national language, he lit a flame of national consciousness, which will be hard to put out. Critics have branded him as an expedient opportunist, but only stubborn facts will always attest to his sincerity and dedication in ushering a political way of life based on social democratic principles and also the adoption of non-alignment as a creed when dealing with other nations of the world. Such criteria have reinforced and established S.W.R.D Bandaranaike as a true statesman.(Courtesy : Daily News)