

## The thoughts of a great reformer      The Sunday Times (11March07)

Glancing through the pages of 'Mettananda Lipi', the 460-page collection of the writings of the dominant nationalist in the 1950s & '60s, L.H. Mettananda, my mind flashed back to the mid-1940s. As a lower form student at Ananda, I admired this wonderful personality who came down from Kandy to sort matters out in the leading Buddhist school following a fire and major upheaval. Dressed in an immaculate white national dress, he had to be tough to bring back discipline among the students.



Buddhist

His first task at the College assembly was to get Ven. Narada Maha Thera to speak to the students. I can vaguely remember the Thera, in his mild preaching style, advising the students to be good boys and protect the name of Ananda.

It didn't take much time for everyone to realise that the new principal who came over from Dharmaraja College, meant business and things quietly settled down. The Mettananda era (1945-55) went down as a period of consolidation when Anandians excelled in studies and fared quite well in other activities too. By the time he retired as principal of Ananda at the end of 1955, he was accepted not only as a leading educationist, but as a nationalist, humanist and revivalist.

'Mettananda Lipi', arranged in chronological order, offers an insight into the thinking of a leading educationist who pinpointed the deficiencies in the education system and highlighted the weak areas of the White Paper presented in July 1950 when Dr Howes was the Director of Education. He was critical of the decision to teach English from Grade II saying it was too early for a child to grasp both his mother tongue and a foreign language. He argued that a second language should be introduced after the child had completed his primary education when the mind was developed. In fact, he believed that it was ample for a student to start studying English when he reached the pre-Senior (Senior School Certificate - SSC was the equivalent of GCE then) level and that four years were sufficient to study English and be able to read English books.

"We should carefully examine why our students should learn English. They should be able to read and understand books written in English. They should also be able to listen to a speech in English and understand what is said. Both these tasks are easier than writing and speaking English. The last two mentioned are essential for diplomats. They can get a special training," he argued. This was his thinking way back in 1952.

His involvement with Buddhist revival work was most visible when he served as a member of the Buddhist Commission of Inquiry appointed by the All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress in 1954. He exposed the plight of the Buddhists in the speech he delivered at the presentation of the Commission report on February 4, 1956 reproduced in the book.

A staunch supporter of Swabasha, he made a strong case as to why Sinhala should be the official language. Stressing that every country has a single official language, in an article written in January 1956, he pointed out how in other Asian countries soon after winning independence from foreign powers, they saw to it that the language of the majority community was accepted as the official language.

He was at the butt end of newspaper cartoonists for the pro-Sinhala stance he took in major issues, particularly by the Observer cartoonist Aubrey Collette. Readers of the book can judge for themselves how he was treated since most of the cartoons have been reproduced.

In an open letter to the Prime Minister on August 30, 1956, five months after the Bandaranaike government was formed, he reminded him of the promises made during the general election and pointed out 11 instances during that short period of how actions of the government were contrary to what was promised.

The stand he took on national issues is clearly visible in the collection of articles between the early 1950s until just prior to his death in 1967. A controversial figure, he fearlessly expressed his opinions through the newspapers, at seminars and political meetings when he supported Philip Gunawardena's MEP during the 1960 March general election campaign. He had formed the 'Dharma Samaja Pakshaya' which signed an MOU with the MEP. If the large crowds that turned up at the meetings were an indication of the outcome of the election, not many would have felt that they would not win the election. But the results were a different story. They got only ten seats.

The latter part of 'Mettananda Lipi' is devoted to discuss the mission, objectives and activities of the 'Bauddha Jatika Balavegaya' (BJB) formed in the early sixties, of which he was the live wire. (Professor K.N. Jayatilleka, K.H.M. Sumathipala, Nissanka Wijeratne, Sommie Meegama, Mahiman Amarasuriya, D.Peter Silva, L.G. Hewage are among the other names mentioned in a series of resolutions presented at a meeting held at Ananda College on June 29, 1963.)

Amongst all the writings in this voluminous work, is a fascinating diary entry of a 21-year-old army volunteer during the 1915 Sinhala-Muslim clashes. Young Mettananda was then a student at the Teacher Training College in Colombo. As a volunteer he describes how he was in the thick of the riots. It's obvious that the training he got stood in good stead for him to tackle student unrest first at Dharmaraja College and later at Ananda.

Publisher Kamaladevi Ediriweera has paid a fitting tribute to her father by gathering his writings and presenting them in a single volume. I wished the name of the publication was included at the end of each article in addition to the date\*.

**By D. C. R.**

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