



Sri Lanka is attempting, after the military victory over the LTTE, to achieve significant economic and social development. But to succeed in this endeavour at the present time of deepening global economic crisis is not going to be easy. There are many lessons to be learned from Dr.N M Perera's long and illustrious political life - that of a visionary statesman.

Dr.N.M.Perera died on August 14, 1979 at the age of 74. To commemorate his 32nd death anniversary a programme is being held today (Sunday) at Yatiyantota, the electorate in the Thun Korale of the Kegalle district, which he represented in Parliament for decades since he was first elected to the State Council in 1936. Prime Minister D.M.Jayaratne and Education Minister Bandula Gunewardane are among the ministers and political leaders who will be participating.

Education

The occasion will be marked by the naming of the Yatiyantota National School as the Dr.N.M.Perera Madhya Maha Vidyalaya, the main road from Karawanella to Yatiyantota as Dr.N.M.Perera Mawatha, and the laying of a foundation stone for his statue in Yatiyantota. He was a conservationist, and to back up the drive initiated by us to stop illicit and extensive sand mining, a tree planting drive will be initiated.

The naming of the school is appropriate not only because he was instrumental in obtaining the land and establishing the school, but also because of the key role that he played in supporting C W W Kannangara and the Education Committee of the State Council to foster the free education scheme. In fact while in British prison, because of his role as a freedom fighter, he produced a booklet on "The case for free education" which helped to convince and overcome the opposition of the powerful English speaking elite. This together with the free health service that he advocated have mainly contributed to helping Sri Lanka achieve creditable social indices, specially among the poor.

But Thun Korale has a special place in Sri Lankan history, as it was here that the anti-imperialist freedom fighters, who had taken on the British rulers as the Suriyamal Movement, directed their energies to serve the neglected poor during the Malaria epidemic in the early 1930s. N M led the teams that took quinine and food (as it included dhal he was fondly called "parippu mahattaya" ever after) and won over the people who made him their leader, though he had no prior ties of kinship with them. He fought against the strong caste oppression and the discrimination against women that prevailed and braved the widespread thuggery unleashed by the local feudal aristocracy and the emerging capitalist class. Meetings were held at election time with great difficulty.

The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP)

This was formed with two main objectives in mind. One was to win complete independence from Britain. The other was to fight for economic and social justice, with the ultimate aim of eliminating exploitation through the establishment of a socialist society. NM, and the other founder leaders of the LSSP like Philip Ginawardena, Dr. S A Wickremasinghe, Dr. Colvin R de Silva and Leslie Goonewardene, used all avenues, including Parliament and the trade union movement, to fight British rule. NM, Philip, Colvin, Edmund Samarakkody and Bernard Soysa were among those jailed by the British both here, and in India (where they joined the struggle for independence led by Gandhi and Nehru). They were not satisfied with the limited independence granted on February 4, 1948 by way of Dominion Status. Sri Lanka only gained complete independence under the rule of the Centre- Left coalition government headed by Sirimavo Bandaranaike, when it passed the Republican Constitution on May 22, 1972. While Dr. Colvin R de Silva was its main architect, NM made a major contribution by giving him the benefit of his constitutional expertise.

An anti-imperialist nationalist

But NM was not just a nationalist who successfully fought for the independence of our country from British colonial rule. He was a Marxist who understood that colonialism was a manifestation of capitalist imperialism, and that so long as imperialism, now led by the USA, dominated the world, Third World countries like Sri Lanka would continue to be exploited even after independence. Therefore NM fought throughout his life, but particularly as the Minister of Finance, for independent economic development in the real interest of Sri Lanka and all its people, and against dependent economic development that would further enslave us in the grip of continuing imperialist exploitation. He strongly advocated a non-aligned foreign policy.

As Minister of Finance

NM was one of the leaders in organizing the G77 group of Finance Ministers, and from it the G24 forum, to remedy the continuing manipulation of the terms of trade so that the prices of Third world products, particularly commodities, in the world market were kept down, while that of manufactured and industrial goods from developed countries were continually rising. The outcome was the adverse balance of trade and chronic indebtedness of Third World countries. This was exploited by USA- led imperialism, using the IMF and World Bank, to impose conditionalities that would facilitate the neo-liberal distortion and rape of our economies. NM, together with Colvin, tried to forge agreements among tea and rubber producing countries to obtain a fair price for our produce, on the lines of OPEC for oil, but without success. He also advocated the development of science and technology to add high value to our raw materials.

While the present economic recession has hit the USA, Europe and Japan most, and had an adverse effect on the markets for our produce, Sri Lanka has benefited by the UPFA Government's non-aligned foreign policies with the emergence of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia,

India, China and South Africa) and other Third World countries as economic and political leaders in the world. We must join these countries in fighting for reform in the IMF and World Bank to better serve the interest of third world countries, on lines suggested by NM.

Economic Policies

In 1973, when NM was Finance Minister, the world faced an economic recession, like today, but mainly precipitated by the steep rise in the price of oil and food, rather than financial speculation. He accepted this not only as a challenge, but also an opportunity to restructure our economy and improve its performance. He strongly advocated restricting imports, so as to reduce our adverse balance of trade, conserve foreign exchange and reduce our foreign debt. This promoted the drive for self-sufficiency in food and other essentials, and it even promoted Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) with greater success than after the economy was subsequently opened. Employment was generated and there was an increase of rural incomes in particular.

The price of imports are bound to rise not only in the context of diminishing supply and increasing demand but also in the face of the current trend towards increasing speculation in global markets, specially for food and fuel, there is a very strong case for a drive towards self sufficiency in these items, as NM advocated. This would provide an opportunity to control prices better, provided we have in place mechanisms to ensure that the farmer and producer get a fair price, while the consumer too does not suffer. Revival of the Paddy Marketing Board and the Marketing Department, with adequate stores, and the CWE together with genuine Multi-purpose and Consumer Cooperatives, as prevailed in NM's time, should be considered. But for this to succeed there has to be an effective drive against corruption and inefficiency throughout the economy, with the lead being given from the top. For prices, particularly of essentials, to be effectively controlled the state should handle at least one third of the market for that item.

A United Sri Lankan Nation

NM always thought and acted regarding all the people of Sri Lanka as equal and sacrificed his political future to ensure the unity of our nation. The nationalist forces (sangha, veddha, guru, govi, kamkaru) that took Mr. SWRD Bandaranaike to power, approached NM before that, and requested him to lead them. NM said he could only do that if they agreed to make both Sinhala and Tamil the official languages in place of English, not just only Sinhala. When they refused he declined to accept the role of leader, and cautioned them of the dangers.

If the nation had listened to what NM and the Marxist Left leaders said the ethnic conflict and war could have been avoided. The sharing of political power among all communities on the principle of subsidiarity is the only guarantee of building the united Sri Lanka that would enable us to achieve the economic development that we are targeting. That a political solution to the ethnic problem must be forged on the basis of a dialogue between the UPFA and the TNA was the message given by the voters at the recently concluded local body elections.

It is our fervent hope that the Select Committee of Parliament that is being summoned for the purpose will be a genuine and serious time bound exercise that will come up with concrete proposals that will be embodied in the Constitution to the satisfaction of a majority of the Sinhalese, the Tamils and Muslims. It is this alone that will prevent Imperialism from meddling in our affairs to their advantage, and our disadvantage.

~ www-islans.lk ~ by Tissa Vitarana