

by Rohana R. Wasala

As for English, which we recognise to be another important tool of rural empowerment, its penetration across the country and especially into the rural hinterland has been held back by constraints of a very different nature. English was and still continues to be perceived and delivered as a gateway to elite status and an emblem of class and privilege. The curriculum and teaching methods followed in our country which places importance not on its use for communication but on its rules of grammar, and make a fetish of dictum, perfect grammar and pronunciation, have only served to maintain it as the exclusive preserve of a selfish privileged class and a tool of social repression.

(From the speech delivered by President Mahinda Rajapaksa at the launch of 2009 as the Year of English and IT at the Presidential Secretariat on February 13, 2009)

The observation contained in the above passage and the context in which it was made should engage the attention of all those who are interested in the teaching of English in this country, particularly, parents, teachers, and educational authorities among them. That a privileged but egoistic elite have always been and still are trying to impede the acquisition by the less fortunately circumstanced sections of the society of a knowledge of English is a popular, oft-repeated charge among certain English language teaching professionals. This class are said to jealously guard English as their exclusive possession, because it is the main source of their power, prestige, privilege, and position; they resent any inroads made by the lower classes into their domain by gaining a knowledge of English. At the same time, the very declaration of a year dedicated for English and Information Technology is a measure of the importance attached by the state to the teaching of the two subjects, which, in our educational context, are obviously correlated; not only does this context underscore the seriousness with which English language teaching is treated by the present administration, but also hints at the sociolinguistic dimension of that

Throwing the baby out with bathwater?



activity.

The purpose of this article is primarily not to critique the view expressed in the speech referred to, but to make some cautionary comments on it lest it should be erroneously interpreted to suggest that certain vitally important elements of the English language can be ignored in teaching it. Such an eventuality would be to the

detriment of the students who need and want to learn English.

The teaching of English in this country is thought by those who subscribe to the above view to be dominated by curricula and methodologies that cater to a certain rarefied 'poshness' in terms of 'perfect' grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary; this alleged conspiratorial insistence

on 'perfection' in the areas of language mentioned is supposed to have put English beyond the reach of ordinary people.

(I must make some clarification at this point. My choice of a passage from a speech given by the President as the epigraph to this article is solely based on the fact that I see it as the latest articulation of a prevalent view in the field of teaching

English in our country about which I have my personal reservations. It is not intended to detract in the least from the well deserved public approbation of the President's deep commitment to the success of the teaching of English. His dedication to this cause is unquestionable as evidenced in the very pragmatic way in which he is trying to deal with the problem by being instrumental in inaugurating a Year of English and IT, and by inspiring a job-oriented 'English as a life skill' project with Indian help before that.)

If we have substantial evidence to believe that there really is at present a 'high class' conspiracy to sabotage the English teaching programme by making an unconscionable demand for linguistic 'perfection', then I too would unhesitatingly condemn such a reactionary stand for two main reasons: 1) to try to monopolize an invaluable and indispensable resource like a good knowledge of the English language to the disadvantage of a vast majority of the population is a violation of democracy as well as social justice, and 2) as commonly known, there is no universally accepted or acceptable 'perfect' form of English, or of any other language for that matter, in terms of grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, etc.

What I am concerned with in this essay, as I have already said in different words, is the danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater! This is because any attack on an alleged unreasonable demand for 'perfect' grammar, pronunciation, and dictum could easily degenerate into a facile advocacy of an 'anything goes' attitude among teaching circles towards those vital aspects of language.

More meaningful and more effective measures than just denouncing what is seen as obsessive attention to the necessity of 'perfect' grammar, pronunciation, etc. have been implemented over the past sixty-five years in order to restrict or overthrow altogether the undue influence of the 'elite' class: the introduction of free education (1944), the change of the medium of instruction (1945), the dethronement of English and the concurrent restoration of the national languages to official status in the post-1956 years, and the take-over of private schools (1961) figure prominently among these.

Continued next Week

The Anti-conversion Bill: ...

First and foremost, any anti-conversion Bill as such is wrong in principle as it affects the right of citizens to choose the religious beliefs which they wish to follow. Secondly, the main problem of the proposed draft is the way 'an unethical conversion' is defined. There are some terms and phrases in the proposed draft of the Bill which are very ambiguous, which are open to all sorts of far-fetched, bizarre interpretations and opportunistic distortions. For example, terms like "allurement" (which occurs in the draft frequently as a key concept) which do not have a clear-cut content, and are thus, open to all sorts of interpretations and opportunistic distortions. The draft even broadens further, and thus, makes the meaning of the term "allurement" become even more vague and ambiguous when it says that the term "means the offer of any temptation for the purpose of converting a person professing a religion to another religion". Accordingly, any religious preaching, for example, could be interpreted as an allurement. This would apply not only to Christian preaching, but also to preaching of other religions, including Buddhism, because the purpose of all preaching is to have some change in one's life, attitudes, orientations, etc. (not necessarily religious) so that the hearers could change their lives from evil or unrighteous ways to good or righteous ways of living. Or else, we do not need preaching at all! If one were to use such vague, ambiguous categories, as used in the proposed Bill, even Buddhist missionary activities in the Western countries, which surely involve preaching, could be interpreted as "allurements", just as Christian missionary activities of preaching elsewhere in the world. Moreover, advice or counselling given by not only Catholic clergy but also by Buddhist clergy to those who come seeking their advice (not necessarily adherents of their own respective religions), can also be interpreted to be an "allurement" intended for an unethical conversion. Charitable works rendered to the poor, the needy, the displaced/refugees, the elderly, the orphans, the prisoners, etc., which are not limited to Christianity today, but which are performed also by Buddhist and other religious institutions, would easily be counted as acts of "allurement". Actually, most of such acts are explicitly named in the draft of the proposed Bill as acts that would amount to such "allurements" for unethical conversions. The drafters seem to have simply missed or ignored the fact that the term "allurement" with its *prima facie* negative ethical connotation, is not only very broad, covering many possible human activities, but it also has the elements of internal dispositions, such as the intention of the act, as its main contents. Now, no human agent, leave alone legal court procedures, is capable of clearly and accurately perceiving what another human being intends. What is manifested through an external act, even by such good acts as works of charity to the most needy (which almost all the religions would interpret as meritorious, pious, religious acts) can be and have been twisted and mis-interpreted, and wrongly perceived as "allurements", at times by certain people in human history. If so, by including such vague, all-encompassing words as the key terms of the proposed Bill, we are heading for real anarchy and harassment of even good, religious acts which are prompted by good religious teachings, irrespective of what the religion is. The minority religions stand to suffer most, as a result. The Bill will be a very welcome instrument in the hands of those who wish to accuse and harass their adversaries, not only religious adversaries. That is to say, if

this Bill is passed, then, invariably, there will be gross violations of the fundamental rights protected by our Constitution. Some of us will have to only make a mental act of believing what is taught in our religions, but not put them to practice!

In fact, in Christianity, from its very inception, such acts of charity are indispensable for a believer. Often, Christianity is synonymous with such charitable works, simply because for us Christians, according to the teachings of Jesus Christ, Our Lord and God, "whatever you do to such a needy person, you do it unto me". That is, whenever we Christians do an act of charity to a needy person, we believe that in and through that needy person, we not only recognize Jesus Christ but we also do that act for Jesus Christ, himself. But, according to the proposed Bill, such traditional, characteristically Christian acts of charity will be distorted and penalized, simply because they can be easily interpreted as acts of "allurement". Anyone who is familiar with Christianity in Sri Lanka (as elsewhere in the world) would surely be well aware of the amount of such charitable activities in which we, Christians are directly involved for centuries, irrespective of the race, caste or the religion of the recipients. According to the proposed Bill, all of us will be guilty of "alluring" others for unethical conversions. Moreover, if one were to follow the draft of the proposed Bill, even such world-renowned Christian charity workers as the Nobel Peace Prize-winner, Mother Theresa of Calcutta, would have been arrested and penalized for getting involved in acts of "allurement" leading to unethical conversions. Our traditionally held great Church feasts, religious processions, etc., will have to be simply stopped because they could be easily interpreted as act intended to "allure" other believers to our religion. Even leading a good, upright, religious life could easily be distorted as an "allurement" simply because such a life could easily attract other people to the source of inspiration (i.e., religion) that in the first place made a person to lead such a good life. What I am trying to highlight here is that if we are bringing in legislation to stop unethical conversions, then, we have to be doubly careful not to hide behind ambiguous, vague, all-encompassing words, concepts and phrases, such as "allurement". We need to be very clear of what we mean by the core concepts and phrases of such legislation. Or else, the damage done to the very right to religious freedom (which the Bill claims to protect) will be great. This is precisely where the Christians, especially the Catholic Church, have many serious reservations about the proposed draft of the Bill, simply because they sincerely fear (not without serious reason) that their very practising of their religion would be curtailed by the way this Bill is formulated.

That the fundamentalist Christian sects have been converting innocent, gullible people of our country to their own religious sects, is a fact, as already mentioned above. But how are we to describe in legal contents what "alluring" exactly would amount to? A Constitution or a law of a country cannot remain vague, leaving open such crucial pieces of legislation for any and every interpretation. If the Constitution or legal codes of the country are meant to protect the common good ("public order") of the people and the fundamental rights of the citizens (such as the right to religious freedom, as is claimed by the drafters of this Bill), then, they should be crystal clear about their content. If they are left open to all sorts of bizarre interpretations and distortions, the very purpose of having a Constitution or

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a legal code, namely, the purpose of promoting the common good and the protecting of the fundamental rights of the citizens will be at stake. It is precisely because of this, that the draft Bill needs serious re-consideration, so that the necessary amendments that protect and promote the fundamental right to religious freedom of all citizens can be made. If and when a minority religion has serious reservations about any proposed law, then, it is the duty of the government to seriously delve into such reservations and attend to them, simply because the majority religion, Buddhism, is already protected by a special clause of our Constitution (Art.9). Besides, our own bitter history with regard to the current ethnic crisis should have already taught us this important lesson. When the 1956 Sinhala Only Act was implemented, the Tamil ethnic minority did raise their voice expressing their legitimate concerns as citizens of this country. But such concerns were unheeded. When the minority Tamil community expressed similar reservations when the 1972 and 1978 Constitutions were adopted, that too went unheeded. Consequently, today, we have reaped a whirlwind, in the form of LTTE terror. Those who dare justify LTTE terror, do so today, using precisely this undeniable, historical reluctance of the majority community to listen to the minority grievances, and we must admit that this has an element of truth, but not the whole truth because there is no valid reason whatsoever that would justify brutal terrorism as that of the LTTE. However, if we, as a nation, have seriously learnt the lessons of 1956, 1972 and 1978, then, we will surely listen to the voices of the discontent, the voices that raise their concerns and fears now in 2009 over the proposed anti-conversion Bill. The writer is reminded here of a phrase written on the walls of Auschwitz, the well-known Nazi concentration camp in southern Poland: "He who does not learn from history, is condemned to repeat the same history!" We as a nation, simply cannot afford to go through yet another spell of blood-shed and violence, by not listening to legitimate concerns and fears of the minority religions. Hence the importance of listening and searching for other alternatives to face this menace of unethical conversions, hence the importance of even amending accordingly, the proposed anti-conversion bill, if there is no other viable alternative to face unethical conversions.

Moreover, gone are the days when we could speak of strictly compartmentalized religions because today all the religions are affected by other faiths and beliefs in one way or the other. Thanks to the phenomena of globalization and mass migrations, today, we live in a multi-religious society, not only in Sri Lanka and Asia, but all over the world. In fact, today, most of the adherents of different religions often do not consider themselves to be exclusively belonging to this or that religion. For many religious people today (especially in Asian countries which are still very religious) to be religious is to be multi-religious or inter-religious. This is a serious problem for the institutionally established major religions from a religious point of view, because often such attitudes of their believers end up in relativism, syncretism and indifference. But no one can deny that many of our peoples are thinking, talking and living inter-religiously, multi-religiously. This is our reality, and so to deny such lived reality in the name of institutional religious boundaries, or to re-demarcate such boundaries in undemocratic ways, is not that wise. The proposed anti-conversion Bill not only presumes but

also seeks to exclusively and artificially reinforce such institutional boundaries in a way that would make all our religions small, exclusive ghettos when the major contemporary trend is to be multi-religious cutting across all institutional boundaries. The writer's main purpose in this essay is not to enter into the merits and demerits of such multi-religious attitudes of our ordinary citizens, but only to point out that in a situation, where strict religious boundaries are realistically not possible, to seek to artificially impose them in the form of an anti-conversion bill is not realistic, but artificial.

Finally, in our Constitution, there is a glaring irony, namely, while it states that all religions are to be treated equally (cf., Articles 10 and 14/1e), it also says that Buddhism is to be accorded "a foremost place" (Art.9). To me, this sounds that all religions are equal, but Buddhism is more equal than others, in our country! In saying so, my purpose here is not to contest or take away the priority of place offered in our Constitution, to the majority religion of our country (Buddhism), but to draw the attention of the reader to the unique responsibility which such accordance of a priority automatically and simultaneously confers on Buddhism itself. That is to say, as the major religion, and as the religion that is accorded a privileged place by the Constitution itself, Buddhism, has the unique duty to not only allay all fears of minority religions about their very own existence and practicing in this country, but also to guarantee (using its unique influence) their right to exist, profess and practice their faiths. If and when the recognized minority religions of our country legitimately foresee (in view of their past bitter experiences) that their very existence is threatened, especially by a parliamentary Bill as the one now before parliament, then, a genuine and concerned listening on the part of the majority religion is what is called for. Personally, I know not only my Buddhist lay friends but also a few Buddhist monks who are worried that we, the minority religions are worried about this proposed draft of anti-conversion Bill. They have lent a listening ear and are in the process of doing whatever they can to re-formulate it. This is the spirit that is called for from the very drafters and sponsors of this Bill, too, namely, to listen sincerely to the grievances and fears of the minority religions, and then, amend the Bill accordingly. The author is personally aware that the local hierarchy of the Catholic Church, too, is very concerned about the unethical conversions in our country. As mentioned already, the Catholics have been at the receiving end of the inroads made by fundamentalist religious conversions. The official Catholic teaching on unethical conversions can be found in the Declaration on Religious Liberty which was issued by the Second Vatican Council in December 1965. It says "in spreading religious belief and in introducing religious practices, everybody at all times must avoid any action which seems to suggest coercion or dishonest or unworthy persuasion, especially in dealing with the uneducated or the poor. Such a manner of acting must be considered an abuse of one's own right and an infringement of the right of others" (No.4). So, the stated concern of the Bill, namely, the unethical conversions, is also a legitimate concern of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka. But what the Church questions is the way we are to go about in responding to such unethical conversions. Unethical conversions are surely an abuse of the right to religious freedom. However, the solution to unethical conversions should not be a worse abuse of the same right! Unfortunately, the pro-

posed draft of the Bill seems to suggest that it not only would curtail unethical conversions, but also ethical conversions, and even the legitimate practising of religions. This is the main worry of the Catholic Church. The very adjective 'unethical' in the phrase "unethical conversion" clearly implies that there are 'ethical' conversions, also. The problem with the proposed draft is that it curtails such 'ethical' conversions, too, for which not only our own Constitution but also the universal Charter of Human Rights have created special space. The draft Bill does not have any clause which protects such legitimate space for ethical conversions.

On the one hand, those who have proposed the anti-conversion Bill surely have their legitimate worries and the ensuing claims, because unethical conversion is a reality in our country, at least since recent times. On the other hand, those who have expressed serious concerns over some of the formulations of the draft Bill also have their fears and ensuing claims, because their fundamental rights are at stake. The common ground for both the groups is that both do acknowledge that there is a problem, namely, unethical conversions, and both groups do acknowledge that the main line religions or Churches are not involved in such conversions, and thus, have a right to their religious freedom. In view of such common ground, it seems to the author that the proposed Bill is a clash of legitimate concerns and fears which are to do with one single right, namely, the right to religious freedom. This is precisely why one needs to ask some disturbing but vital questions: Is an anti-conversion Bill the only solution in stemming unethical conversions? What are the other alternatives we have to meet the menace of unethical conversions? Have we had any official, impartial, scientific survey made about unethical conversions? Have we ever addressed the main causes, such as degrading poverty and awful ignorance among those who become victims of such unethical conversions? Could not the mainline established religions of our country make a combined effort to effectively address such main causes? Won't a consensus among the recognized major religions over what ought to be done in confronting unethical conversions more effective than a unilateral proposal of a parliamentary Bill? What about proposing a strict Code of Conduct for the Fundamentalist Sects who are accused as the main culprits with regard to unethical conversions? Since we already have the necessary clauses in our legal system to address the aberrations of the right to religious freedom, such as unethical conversions, instead of creating new laws won't it be more effective in trying to enforce strictly and impartially the existing laws in stemming all unethical conversions? Consequently, isn't an anti-conversion Bill in parliament the last resort (i.e., after having had sincerely and seriously tried all the other available alternatives)? The solution to one obvious injustice (i.e., unethical religious conversions) is surely not another injustice (i.e., trampling upon the fundamental right to religious freedom of minority religions). In trying to protect the aberration of one right, the right to religious freedom (i.e., to prevent the obviously deplorable unethical conversions), one simply cannot strike so blindly at the very heart of the very foundation of a person's right to religious freedom. The intended cure to any sickness should not be worse than the sickness itself!