

Take the middle path for religious harmony

Sri Lanka's only living former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga whose family was at the helm of the country for more than 25 years has come out strongly against prevailing religious tensions and called on all leaders and the people to follow the hallowed middle path of religious unity in diversity.

OUR THOUGHT

This was the path taken by the great son of Indian Emperor Asoka who was instrumental in introducing the Buddha's teachings to Sri Lanka. The rock edicts of Asoka are a testimony for tolerance that existed within the Mayurya Empire during his reign that marked the golden age of Buddhist India.

Addressing a meeting held at the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute on Tuesday to present the recommendations of the 'Forum for Inter Faith Dialogue' (FOIFD) to promote religious harmony, Ms Kumaratunga said she had remained silent for a long time because the government media battered her when she spoke out openly on vital issues. But now she had decided as a premier citizen to speak out for religious harmony because she believed most moderate Buddhists were afraid to speak out because of the fear of threat, intimidation and violence.

Ms. Kumaratunga said that as part of her mission to revive religious harmony and unity in diversity the South Asian Policy Research Institute headed by her had decided to set up the Forum for Inter Faith Dialogue. Among those who participated in Tuesday's meeting were Anunayake Thera of Maha Vihara Vanshika Shiyampali Maha Nikaya Mahawatta Chapter of Sri Lanka - Venerable Niyangoda Vijithasiri Thera, the Anunayake Thera of the Amarapura Maha Nikaya - Venerable Kotugoda Dhammawasa Thera, Colombo's former Archbishop Rt Rev Oswald Gomis, Moulavi M.R. Mahir and S. Kuhantha Sharma Swamy.

To build religious harmony in Sri Lanka the FOIFD has recommended that the law should be implemented strictly and fully with regard to unlawful activities that impinge on various religious communities. It has called for the setting up of inter-faith committees in and out of Colombo as a mechanism to watch for early warning signs of religious disturbances and report to law enforcement authorities at the 24-hour hotline for early preventive action. This would help in neutralising acts of religious violence between different religious groups.

The Forum has also proposed that a study and review of existing laws regarding the establishment and functioning of places of religious worship, religious practices and recommend amendments to prevent conflicts arising from the absence of rules and regulations in these areas.

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The Inter-Religious Forum believes the curriculum used in all educational institutions must contain clear messages with regard to the importance of respecting ethnic, religious, and political diversities. School curricula must also teach the importance of religious harmony and co-existence, while emphasising the dangers posed to the country, the national economy, political stability and to each individual citizen, by causing and promoting disharmony, intolerance and conflict.

The school curriculum must impart a basic knowledge of all religions while a pupil's own religion is taught in detail. The schools should also encourage all students to participate in inter-religious activities, celebrated both in schools and homes.

In all virtuous things it is good to start at the beginning and we are glad that the Inter-Religious Forum has emphasised the importance of starting it in schools. The children need to be taught and trained to practice their own religion with commitment and conviction. They should learn to respect the faiths, beliefs and traditions of other religions too.



Those in the minority religions also need to be aware that Sri Lanka is essentially a Buddhist country with a culture and civilisation dating back to thousands of years. These need to be respected by all. In this light, religious practices or rituals must be conducted in a manner that would not offend the sensitivities and sentiments of other religions and Sri Lanka being a country where a majority of the people shows compassion to animals, religious rituals should be carried out with utmost concern to the sensitivities of others.

Also a flashpoint in some cases had been the conversions using material inducements by non-traditional religious sects which are backed by funding from foreign organisations. These new religious sects through the establishment of their branches in villages and suburban areas plant the seeds of disharmony through their activities that irk the general population of those areas that would ultimately lead to violent reactions.

Also the radicalisation and assertiveness of certain minority religious groups in certain areas had led to a similar radicalisation among majority groups as a reaction. This was very much prevalent in the recent events that led to religious tensions.

Therefore, all such concerns need to be addressed in moves aimed at creating religious harmony. If such positive steps are taken it would lead towards a harmonious Sri Lanka where the voice of strife is silent.