

COMRADE MALIYAGODA – AN APPRECIATION

Birty Gajameragedera

Jayaratne Maliyagoda of Kanda Udarata who was popularly known as “Comrade Maliyagoda” was one of my long-standing close friends. The demise of Jayaratne Maliyagoda has deprived me of a very valuable political, intellectual and a social companion.

In this appreciation, I do not want to deal with the vast and varied aspects of Comrade Maliyagoda’s public career. I merely want to refer to some essential aspects of his life which I consider to be relevant to the understanding of the role he played in Left politics in the country. The origin of his Left politics and trade union activities can be traced back to the late fifties and early sixties. He gradually emerged as a central leader of Left politics and the trade union movement in the Kandy district and in the Central Province. He became an institution in Kandy and his departure has created a major void in the city. It is not easy to fill this vacuum. His office at Kotugodella Veediye, Kandy was the hub of the Left political and trade union activities for well over four decades. Comrade Maliyagoda presided over all these activities in a statesmanlike manner, giving it the necessary ideological orientation. He organized plantation workers and from 1972 onwards and was from 1972 onwards the president of Lanka General Services Union and was one of the founding members of the WPI, the Workers and Peasants Institute.

He was the foremost leader of the Left and the trade union movement in Kandy district. He together with Newton Gunasinghe, Kumari Jayawardena, Birty Gajamedagedera, Dayan Jayatilake, Pulsara Liyanage, George Seneviratne and Jayadeva Uyangoda formed the WPI, and gave it dynamic leadership.

With his strong base in the Central Province, he also played a noteworthy role in the national trade union movement. He did not miss a single important meeting in Colombo. He had his own point of view on all national issues and he regularly published his ideas in the national press. But he was never dogmatic. He was alive to the changing national and global issues, and was an alert and keen observer of Sri Lanka’s highly volatile and difficult realities. The last major article he wrote, “The Current Political Situation: What is to be done?” was an excellent piece of political writing. His ill health did not debar him from trying to

comprehend and analyze development in the country until the very end.

The most remarkable characteristic of his long political career was the way in which he confronted manifold crises that faced the Left movement such as the break up of the Left alliance in 1963, the open eruption of the Sino-Soviet dispute in 1963, Sri Lanka’s coalition politics which began to unfold in the mid-sixties and the JVP insurrections of 1971 and 1988. When confronted with these crises, Comrade Maliyagoda demonstrated a great deal of resilience with the necessary clear ideological perspective. This determination he derived from his Marxist ideological orientation and the working-class foundation of his political career. These qualities manifested themselves in the indomitable courage that he showed in facing up to the many confrontations that arose during the July 1980 strike.

At the bottom of his heart, this remarkable leader was a great socialist revolutionary but he never acted in disregard of the concrete conditions in Sri Lanka and the world. Through protracted interaction with the people, Maliyagoda emerged as a great democrat. He intentionally interacted with the people of all walks of life and carefully listened to their points of view without showing any antagonism. There wasn’t even a trace of vindictiveness in his social relationships – friendship to all, enmity to none was his underlying philosophy of life.

Jayaratne Maliyagoda was disinterested in enriching himself and never sought economic gain or positions of power and influence in spite of his obvious multiple abilities and close friendship at times with those holding the reins of power. He was a director of the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute and was on the Council of Management of the Social Scientists’ Association. He was a highly disciplined, very methodical and systematic person and sacrificed his entire life to the common good of the masses of this country.

People in the Kandy district and in the country at large who knew Comrade Maliyagoda will forever remember him and his contributions to Left politics and the trade union movement of Sri Lanka. ■

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