

# HONOURING C.R. HENSMAN

PIONEERING RADICAL THINKER AND ACTIVIST, INSPIRING MENTOR, WARM FRIEND,  
LOVING FAMILY MAN

Thiru Kandiah

The news of Mr. C.R. Hensman's death in London in July left my wife Indraneel and me feeling a deep sense of personal loss. Intense though that was, it was not all. The sense of loss was given a certain largeness of scale that carried it well beyond ourselves by our awareness that with his going, our country had lost one of the most exceptional of a dwindling group of persons who have had so much of immeasurable value to give and teach it, even more so in its present state of intellectual and moral confusion.

Let me make my way to the larger matters from the personal angle. I first met Mr. Hensman when he taught me English literature in the university entrance classes at St. Thomas' College, Mt. Lavinia, in 1954. That 'Mr.' in the preceding sentence requires explanation before I go on. I respected and revered him too much to ever accept his invitation, as our friendship grew, to address him by his first name. When he was not around, his students would call him "Henny," but otherwise he was always 'sir' — and so he always remained to me, not in any formal, distancing sense, but in humble acknowledgement of how much he had given me, and with great admiration and love. No doubt all of us, as we move into life from the uncertainties of our beginnings, are fortunate to encounter people who, by the positive influence they exert on our lives, set us on the way to being the person we might eventually become at our best. But, in the case of those of us who are the most fortunate, among the people we meet thus is someone who is so special that as he or she grows into our lives, the encounter takes on deeper and more fulfilling layers of meaning, adding further dimensions of value and substance to the difference that person makes to us.

To me, Mr. Hensman was one such person. Our respective circumstances never permitted me, after those early enriching years of contact and interaction, to remain too much in touch with him. But to meet and get to know him was to take him lastingly into the depths of one's being. That was the kind of person he was: utterly inspirational, and able to touch and change lives immeasurably for the better. For myself, I can

say with no exaggeration that he was one of the greatest influences in my life, putting me on the road that I was to go along so satisfyingly for the rest of it, and profoundly shaping the entire way in which I was to see and understand things until today.

Many students in my class had little of the street-wisdom, assuredness and scepticism of students at that level today; but I was even more ignorant, naive and unsure about what anything was about or what I wanted to do with myself than anybody else in the class, tending to take things as they came by chance upon me, and, generally, responding in simple gut-reactive ways to them. My parents had told me that according to my horoscope I was going to be a lawyer; and, as far as I was concerned, that was all there was to it — a lawyer I was going to be, for were not parents there to send us along our way, and teachers to tell us what we needed to know as we went on that way?

I am now 70, and law is yet as remote from me as it was when my horoscope was cast around the time of my birth. And that is because Mr. Hensman changed all that, irrevocably. For some reason, he felt that I had potential to be more than the nondescript and unpromising person I appeared destined to be, and took me in hand, encouraging me with my English studies. Perhaps as a sensitive and concerned teacher he recognized something which might have led him to see stuff in me that I didn't know I had. He never tried to dissuade me from doing law; he had too much respect for the individual and his/her mind and commitments ever to interfere gratuitously in such matters. But when one day he found out what I had been planning to study in university, he asked me, in a kindly, completely non-coercive way, to consider whether, given that I was not doing too badly in his classes, it might not be useful to think of doing something more general in the way of studies *before*, having broadened my outlook in that way, I went into a narrower specialty. So much did I respect and admire him that all he had to do was to ask the question, and my mind was



immediately made up – I was going to do English. During the rest of the period he taught me in school, he greatly encouraged my interest in this subject. In fact, after he had resigned his position at St. Thomas', he even offered, when I was later selected for entrance to the university, to give me free tuition if I got a chance to sit for the English scholarship exam the university conducted for new entrants. Given his own material circumstances at the time, this was quite a sacrifice. And so, English studies became what the rest of my studies and my professional work have been all about. My entire academic and professional career has been something that I owe to him.

That was not all. My naïveté persisted, even after I had been thus put on my way by him. I was acquiring information in university satisfactorily enough, but I still did not have a larger framework of understanding that would help me bring things coherently and meaningfully together. Again, it was Mr. Hensman who changed all of that. The annual Student Christian Movement Conference in April 1958 (I had just finished my second year at university) took place in Vaddukkodai that year. The conference was memorable for me for two different reasons, both of which were to change me profoundly, and forever.

One, I met Indranee, who, like me, had come all the way from Kandy for the event, and was a few years later to become my wife – and what a great and blessed difference that has made to my life! The other, Mr. Hensman participated, along with several other distinguished scholars and theologians, in a discussion of the ethnic tensions that were being assiduously drummed up at the time by persona and institutions of the state, before they were unleashed as terrorist racial riots a few weeks later. In the course of some very perceptive and reasoned analytical remarks, against a background of Christian theological considerations and fundamental ethical and human values, he explained, clearly and quietly and with that courteous dignity that was a hallmark of all his exchanges, the radical politico-ideological thinking that had led him to support the LSSP in its language policy. (The party had not then joined the rest of our tribe of politicians in their opportunistic slide into the cynical populism that has stripped them of all moral authority.) No histrionics, no clever point scoring, no aggressive polemics, no sophistry or disingenuous rationalization, but wholesome, enlightened and enlightening reason; and that, too, not cold and impassive, but given life and body and meaning by strong ethical commitment and profound human conviction – after all, had not the great Samuel Johnson observed long ago, and with such insight, that he who thinks reasonably must think morally? I had only

to hear that entirely reasonable and deeply concerned human voice, and I knew straightaway how and where I was going to seek out the integrating framework of thought I was looking for. All the thinking and teaching and writing I have done since then took off from that moment, and whatever meaning and satisfaction I have personally found in my work in later years, whatever little recognition that thinking and teaching and writing might perchance have earned, derive from those remarks that he made.

Some of the things which have most made me what I am are, then, things that I owe hugely to Mr. Hensman – which is why for me to have known him must surely be one of the very great blessings of my life.

People talk of purity of heart and the blessedness of those who are endowed with it. But Mr. Hensman was doubly blessed, for in his case we *must* talk, too, of his purity of mind, which went integrally with that purity of heart. His was one of the cleanest and purest of minds I have ever encountered, honourable to the core, and entirely uncontaminated by the faintest trace of the meanness, pettiness, suspicion, unworthy self-promotionalism, competitive malevolence and duplicity that we see around us today. That heart/mind was filled instead with concern and compassion for the humanity around him, particularly for the disinherited among them, which flowed into all his life and work, issuing in various pioneering practical initiatives that had the potential to give the world just that little more of a chance to turn into a better place. They were his response to what was nothing less than a driving utopian imperative within him, which, as all great leaders over the ages have recognized, is so critically necessary if human beings are to be truly human and truly free. Indeed, notwithstanding the *avant gardiste* anti-humanism of a lot of the more dominant epistemological discussions of our times, its necessity is acknowledged even in the purportedly impersonal 'objective' scholarly realms which are home ground to such discussions – Frederik Jameson, for instance, learning from Herbert Marcuse, absolutely insists on it.

I remember how intrigued several of us students at St. Thomas' were when Mr. Hensman, with the dedicated help of Mrs. Hensman, and the goodwill of some of the country's best minds, started the Community Institute and the journal *Community*. We guessed that something very special and important was going on, and could not help admiring the courage and commitment that made him give up the material security of a steady job so that he could devote his time and energies fully to the project, and in a manner that procured



him the independence of thought and action that would allow him to protect his personal integrity as he did so. Mrs. Hensman's active participation in much of this, and the unwavering encouragement and backing she gave him through the sometimes wearing demands of the journey on which they had set out together, were not something on which it would be easy to put a value.

It was only gradually, as we saw more of what Mr. Hensman was doing, that we moved to a fuller realization of the vital meaning of what was going on and glimpsed something of its scale, causing our initial curiosity to change over the years into wondering admiration, and from there in turn into gratitude. We could perhaps be forgiven our tardiness in arriving at understanding. For what Mr. Hensman was doing was taking the pioneering initiatives, in terms of the specificities of his own context, for the founding and consolidation of a far-reaching project that was assuming immense human significance within the global socio-political-economic order: the project that as time went on, and self-conscious work began to be found for it, came to be called the project of post-colonial liberation, renewal and reconstruction. The world was only just emerging from the long night of the imperialist-colonialist imposition and dispossession, and resurgent nations and their peoples were everywhere struggling to find themselves again, and move on to their lives and destinies on the basis of their own resources of sensibility, imagination and intellect.

The challenges of such liberation were hugely forbidding, for it could not be carried out except within the inextricably interconnected "contradictory unity" (I borrow the term from Aijaz Ahmad) into which empire/capitalism had, through their hierarchizing structuring operations, reconstituted the world during the preceding few centuries. The wide and disparate range of issues that the challenges cast up were impossibly complex, demanding a deep and perceptive effort of understanding if responses which could contribute viably and responsibly to the post-colonial task were to be found. There wasn't, in the epistemological realm of the context at that time, our present taken-for-granted consciousness of the necessity in the public sphere to concertedly and consistently ask serious questions in ways that transcended the merely reactive, and cut across diverse sectional or partial interests. Moreover, those who were inclined to do so (and there were indeed several, particularly in progressive political quarters), tended to work in relative isolation from each other, or on matters that were immediately at hand in the comparatively restricted circles or constituencies in which they operated. There was also a further major consideration. The imperial

dispensation was only just on its way out, and the most comfortably available models and parameters of thought, certainly the more dominant of them, could hardly enable the kind of understanding of the issues that the task absolutely demanded. The great South African martyr, Steve Biko, was, years later, to make explicit the potent danger of subversion the situation posed for the post-colonial task, in his telling observation that the most powerful weapon in the armoury of the oppressor was the mind of the oppressed.

It was out of his far-sighted and acutely perceptive sense of such matters that Mr. Hensman launched his ground-breaking initiatives. The title of his Institute and its journal points to the vision that inspired them, that of an ever-widening *community* of concerned, progressive thinking minds who would recognize each other and come together in non-homogeneous solidarity to work towards what was a dramatically exciting goal: to seek out, through raising in the public sphere a Freirean critical consciousness of the most important issues of the time (including literary issues), fresh and truly independent forms of awareness and thought for our people. These would derive their vitality and authenticity from the specific historically-constituted realities of the Lankan context in which the task of liberation was most immediately being pursued, and from the distinct concerns and perspectives of the people who gave life to that context, though with a firm eye fixed also on the larger global context. Consequently, they would help bring the highly complex and disparate challenges the task involved insightfully and coherently together under the radical understanding that would truly advance its pursuit.

In scope and significance, the vision carried well beyond the boundaries of the immediate context in which the initiatives were initially pursued. It gave expression to an encompassing epistemological framework of radical, ethically invested politico-ideological thought that, with its sharp awareness of the systemic sources of some of the most challenging problems of the prevailing global order, had relevance and value for a non-ad hoc understanding of them. This was, over the years, to receive increasingly complete, explicit and powerful formulation and articulation through a series of publications, including several well-recognized books, that Mr. Hensman produced, and his many contributions to seminars and discussions in Sri Lanka and abroad.

His thinking on these matters was not restricted to a purified world of abstract ideas; there was always implicated in the emerging theorization of his position a praxis of active socio-political change directed, particularly, towards transforming



the conditions of life of the very large numbers of dispossessed people in the world. The second part of the title of his edited book of Third World readings was in fact "the polemics of revolt." The first part of the title, "from Gandhi to Guevara," functioning as a lead to that second part, extends an interesting invitation to the readers of the book to raise searching questions about the demonizing stereotyping of all resistance to hegemony and repression, through which those who benefit from such hegemony and repression secure acquiescence in the situation. By bringing these two famous figures together at different ends of a shared revolutionary journey, it invites the readers of the book to recognize both the varieties of possible modes of resistance or challenge, and the need for nuanced distinctions in comprehending their nature.

Among the many useful effects that his books on China and Sun Yat Sen had was exactly this kind of necessary educational effect. Sun Yat Sen had, after all, played a major role in the awakening of China in the early twentieth century to a sense of its modern destiny, through his promotion of anti-dynastic and anti-imperialist awareness. Widespread racially-based anti-Chinese hysteria was at its height at the time of Mr. Hensman's book on China, fuelling the efforts of the controllers of the dominant imperialist/capitalist world order to divert attention from its nature and dynamics, the human cost of its unacceptable consequences, and their own central role in it all. No doubt China might now have set itself the goal of integrating itself into that same order. But, at the time of the book there was an urgent need for the record to be set straight – not that the need has even now entirely subsided.

It is this same steadfast determination not to allow the forbidding complexities and contradictions of the challenges of the post-colonial liberatory effort to cause him to lose sight of the key issues at hand that shows in his readiness to invoke the notion of the 'Third World' in his writings. As is well known, the notion is a very fraught one. It is not only that it is difficult to identify a fixed, homogeneous entity situated in a firmly demarcated geographical location to which the label might straightforwardly be applied. In addition, the notion itself has, from very early in its history, been pressed into less-than-worthy service in all kinds of internal and geopolitical maneuverings, by various nations, forces and

figures, not least the national(ist) bourgeois leadership of many post-colonial states. At the same time, its value in discussion, like that of the allied term "post-coloniality," which has equally been subjected to such sceptical erasure (particularly in the field of a literary post-coloniality influenced by an *avant gardiste* post-modernism), has been inestimable. For, it has made impossible a comfortable evasion of an encounter with those degrading features of unfreedom, inequality, injustice, oppression, poverty, violence and so on which define existence for very many individuals and communities across the world, alienating them from their self-hood, their nature and their humanity.

Mr. Hensman's own innate sense of humanity made the notion a very useful one for him to draw on, but not in a way that left the reservations about it intact. Instead, consistent with the epistemological framework he had worked out for himself, he effectively read it as an extensive, unequal structured position or space within the current world order, constructed through the very same process by which capitalism, riding on empire, restructured the world into the contradictory, hierarchized unity that it is. (We might note, before going on, that that position or space could, therefore, potentially manifest itself in any geographical location, even, as the experience of the recent hurricanes in the USA was to reveal in our own times, in parts of its southern cities.) His book *Rich against Poor: The Reality of Aid*, confirms that this is how he conceived of the 'Third World,' revealing again how valuably the notion served him in addressing the human issues that mattered.

In applying the notion, he consistently did so with the Freireian kind of critical consciousness already remarked on above. It is this critical consciousness, supported by his ethical commitments and reinforced by his own experience of race riots, that he displayed in examining the phenomenon of nationalism. This phenomenon, specifically in its cultural form, has often had a very significant positive contribution to make to liberatory post-colonial struggles, certainly in the literary realm; so significant, in fact, that Jameson, for instance, would make it a necessary feature of such struggles. In spite of his strong commitment to the post-colonial cause, however, Mr. Hensman's critical awareness led him to ask challenging questions of nationalism. An issue of *Community* in the early 1960s acknowledged something of the positive



strand, as expressed in the resurgent literature and drama that was produced as Sri Lanka moved into her own on emerging from colonialism. But the other strand did not include recognition: the univalent, repressive strand that expressed itself in the kind of exclusionary, fascist, genocidal behaviour that our country has for too long been made to suffer. His book, *Sri Lanka: The Unfinished Quest for Peace*, expresses something of his thinking on the matter, thinking that again expressed itself in deeds through active involvement in human rights work.

My account would be seriously incomplete if it didn't explicitly look at Mr. Hensman's deep religious belief. Just as his thought was always inextricably tied to action and the possibilities of action, so this thought/action would not separate itself from his faith — he was too integrated a person for such compartmentalization. In fact, much of what has been looked at above seems to represent a kind of secular intellectual reflex of his unwavering practice, in his own personal life, of the second great commandment of his Christian religion, relating to loving one's neighbour as oneself. This eloquently manifested itself in all his dealings with his fellow beings, whatever their rank, ethnicity, religious conviction, gender and so on. In a sense, this is the more difficult of the two great commandments to follow tangibly open as its practice is to strategy; it does not allow the kind of self-delusory claims and pretenses to which the other one (about loving God) so commonly lends itself. (Of, incidentally, the requisite doctrinal adjustments are made, this would seem to be an occasional hazard of all faiths, including secular-sounding ones.) But in Mr. Hensman's case, there was no such separation; the two commandments plainly met in all he did and thought, lending further conviction even while dispensing on it a certain texture of wise understanding. His later books, *Agenda for the Post*, *New Beginnings* and *The Rescuing of Humanity*, worked purposively to show how in the epistemological realm the theological and the secular, as well as thought and action, came integrally together for him.

Through all of these large and public dimensions of Mr. Hensman's life and work there came strongly through as a

personal level a sense of a unique man, one of the most human of human beings we could ever hope to know. His friends will never forget the sincerity and warmth and the sheer satisfaction of the friendship he offered them. My wife, Indranee, met and got to know Mr. Hensman and his family through me, and if she remains grateful to me for that, it is because she came to know and experience for herself some of the many things I had told her about them. Such things always touch, meaningfully, and leave one so much the richer for them. As a family man he was again exceptional, a caring and loving husband and father. We have already seen something of the solid support Mrs. Hensman had given him in his various courageous ventures. That kind of giving was mutual, and, indeed, their togetherness and commitment to each other were legendary. I remember a conversation I had with him just a few years ago, shortly before he and Mrs. Hensman had left Sri Lanka for England. Mrs. Hensman had fallen ill and was very frail, and it was obvious to everybody what a lot of demanding looking after he was doing. When I once inquired after Mrs. Hensman's health, he explained some of her ailments and the treatment they needed and then added, quite as a matter of course, what a great joy it was for him to do these things for her. How much it moved Indranee when I recounted this to her!

The going of such a man is loss indeed. Certainly, our country desperately needs people like him, given the self-mutilating course on which it has set itself; it is only through retrieving his kind of vision that it can cease to be the sad, lost place it seems to have become. His friends will know a great emptiness, much more so his family who were so joyfully near to him when he was alive. As always, it will be the memories that will carry us through — the memories of a most extraordinary human being. Just to remember him would be to share again in his ideas, to learn again from his thinking and actions, and to know and experience what is good and true and gracious and kind. ■

Dr. Talim Kaddah is the former Professor of English at the University of Peradeniya.