

TRIBUTE TO MY FATHER

Rohini Hensman

My father, C.R. ('Dick') Hensman, died peacefully in London on 9 July 2008. Among the many people sending in tributes to him, several refer to the enormous influence he had on them, and I suppose I belong to that category too. He introduced me to revolutionary politics as well as liberation theology at an early age, and his vision of global justice has inspired me all my life.

Much of his earlier work, and especially his books *China: Yellow Peril? Red Hope?* (SCM Press, 1968), *From Gandhi to Guevara: The Polemics of Revolt* (Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1969), *Sun Yat-sen* (SCM Press 1971), and *Rich against Poor: The Reality of Aid* (Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1971) had a strong anti-imperialist focus. He identified whole-heartedly with the struggles of Third World peoples against both old-style European colonialism and the more recent US imperialism, and had a wide knowledge of liberation movements in all their diversity. Yet, unlike latter-day apologists for authoritarian regimes in the Third World, who represent their atrocities as resistance to pressure from imperialist countries on human rights issues, his critique of political leaders in developing countries who robbed and oppressed their own people was equally trenchant.

His books on Sri Lanka, written under the pseudonym L. Piyadasa, exemplify his passionate opposition to injustice and oppression within his own country. After the 1983 anti-Tamil pogroms, he wrote *Sri Lanka: The Holocaust and After* (Marram Books, 1984), which documented and analysed the events not only of that fateful day but also of the periods preceding and following it. This was one of the first publications to expose the horrifying evidence of government sponsorship of the violence, and involvement of people at the highest levels of power in what would today be classified as crimes against humanity.

The analysis was continued in a sequel, *Sri Lanka: The Unfinished Quest for Peace*, (Marram Books, 1987), published following the Indo-Lanka Accord. What was

striking was that he attributed the violence not to widespread inter-ethnic hatred but to the drifting of the Sri Lankan state towards fascism. It was made very clear in both books that the solution was *not* a separate Tamil Eelam, which would inevitably suffer from the same authoritarian and exclusivist politics as the proposed Sinhala Buddhist state, but a Sri Lanka where people from all ethnic and religious communities could live in any part of the island in security, dignity and peace.

In later life, his aversion to all forms of injustice and cruelty made him a natural ally of all those battling against the exclusion and oppression of women, children and gay people. His concern for social justice as well as his interest in environmental issues found expression in his more philosophical and theological works, *Agenda for the Poor: Claiming their Inheritance*, (Centre for Society and Religion, 1990), *New Beginnings: the Ordering and Designing of the Realm of Freedom*, (Third World Perspectives, 1992) and *The Remaking of Humanity*, (Christhava Sahithya Samithi, 2000).

His personal relationships embodied the same principles. My mother supported him in all his endeavours, accompanying him back and forth across thousands of miles, and taking on the role of the steady breadwinner so that he could have the opportunity to freelance. All too many men take that kind of devotion from their spouses for granted, and never dream of reciprocating in any way, but not my father. For some years past, as my mother's health deteriorated, he spent more and more of his declining strength caring for her, and he continued right to the very end. His devotion to her, and love for his other close relations and friends, mean that he will be sorely missed by all of us.

In the last few weeks of his life, he said more than once that he considered my work to be a continuation of his own, and it makes me feel very proud indeed to think that some part of him lives on in me. ■