

HARRY ABEYGOONEWARDENE

The death of a utopian socialist

My interaction with Harry (uncle) came across my father's friendship with him, a friendship that was mostly based on their activism in the Communist Party (CP) in the late 1940s. Both Harry and my father were dismissed from the CP in 1953. But, unlike my father who retracted, Harry continued his active struggle. His struggle, often controversial, was fundamentally about social transformation. A transformation that was utopia and decisively socialist. As Premalal Kumarasiri (also an MP in the first parliament and CP leader) says, Harry walks into his house saying "we have to do something to change what's happening," (to which Premalal answers in jest, "if we couldn't do it when we were young and able, how are we going to do it now when old and feeble, *yanawa oi yanna*"). The death of Harry at age 83 (1918-2001), is a sad occasion for the left movement and those in general trying to inspire democratic social change.

In 1948, Harry, at the age of thirty was the second general secretary of the CP, and was the Communist MP from Matara. He led a group of 'radicals' that essentially undermined the experienced and established leadership of Dr. S. A. Wickramasinghe, Peter Keneuman, Premalal Kumarasiri, H.G.S. Ratnaweera and M.G.Mendis. According to a CP official document, Harry was the leader of "left-sectarian tendency" within the CP. They argued that, "a revolutionary situation was fast maturing and nearing the point of eruption; that all mass struggles, even if they originated with limited aims, should be extended into open classes with the existing state and social order; that the immediate aim of the Party should be the insurrectionary overthrow of the UNP government, the destruction of the Soulbury state apparatus and the establishment of a People's Democracy which was considered the only transitional from capitalism to socialism" (CP 25th Anniversary Issue, 1968).

The slogan at the time was : "organisation through the struggle" (*satana thulin samagiya*). The CP strategy was influenced by various resistance movements in the region, among them the Telengana Rebellion, Hyderabad, 1946-1951. This movement involving a sustained armed struggle against the rich peasants was led by the communist leadership. At Gasnawa estate in Kegalle, Higgoda Dharmasena, put the theory into practice by taking over the management of that estate by workers. The police were unable to enter the estate and the workers with the assistance of the CP leadership continued production for several weeks. The strategy was aimed at influencing similar uprisings in other estates. However, that failed to take place and the uprising was crushed. Following this incident, the employers derecognised the CP plantation union (CPW) and the also state banned it, essentially making it defunct until 1956. In effect, under Harry's leadership, between September 1948 and September 1950, the new strategy was to do some damage to the CP and its trade unions, particularly in the plantations.

Under Harry's leadership, the CP launched a daily party newspaper in Sinhala called the *Communist*. It was the first working class daily newspaper in Ceylon, and lasted for over a year. As Dew Gunsekera has said, this was a task that was of great effort and commitment, given that even at present, none of the major parties have popular party newspapers.

After Harry's expulsion from the CP, he went on to publish booklets and teach in tutorials run by the Buddhist Theosophical Society. He remained mostly a teacher until his retirement around 1973 at the age of 55 (1954-55 Lawrence College in Gampaha and Windsor College in Nugegoda; 1966-72 Rahula College, Galle). In mid-1980s, he was involved with a group of activists that were struggling against the arrests, detention and harassment of students under the J.R. government. Harry remained active through out his life getting involved in various autonomous groups and writing both in Sinhala and English.

Harry was a keen student of language, particularly Sinhala and English. He talked about the need to understand the language roots of Sinhala and English, in order to be able to teach it. He mentioned that he was in the process of working on the manual for teaching English for Sinhala students. Even for the Sinhala language, he thought the alphabet should be modernised with accents similar to the French language. While supporting the need to transform the Sinhala, he also firmly stood for the right of self-determination for the minorities and a federalist framework.

Harry was deeply concerned with a range of issues, language, culture, class, and ecology. Particularly on ecology, Harry highlighted the relevance of the Club of Rome's *Limits of Growth* perspective. Harry was deeply critical of the consumer culture that fetishised commodities while distorting real needs and wants of human beings. His potential alternative was to promote mutual-aid societies as articulated by Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), what some called as a theory of "anarchist communism." He was curious about new theoretical developments, always with a view towards putting things into practice.

Harry was an active, inspiring individual, often described as an 'eccentric.' But, he was most of all a Marxist humanist, who searched ways to transform dominant world-views and social values that sustain conditions of war, poverty, and inequality.

Harry will be missed, for his courage and commitment to a vision of emancipation and the struggle against human estrangement from simply living. For Harry, it was always about living simply.

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