

“FATHER OF SOCIALISM” TRIBUTE TO PHILIP GUNAWARDENA

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Fulsome tributes were paid to Philip Gunawardena on the occasion of the first centenary of his birth at a recent public gathering in Colombo. There were speakers from the SLFP, LSSP, Communist Party, MEP, and DVJP all of whom referred to Philip as the “Father of Socialism” in Sri Lanka. This is the first occasion on which so many prominent speakers from the principal Left-wing political parties found a common platform to pay tribute to one who had been their original leader but, in the development of events, had moved away from them and engaged them in fierce battles over the differences that had surfaced between them. These battles lacked nothing in ferocity and bitterness while they lasted. What Philip’s birth centenary now reveals is that these battles did not blind their participants to the virtues and magnificent achievements of the man they fought against.

It is necessary to remember that Philip Gunawardena did not write memoirs or even generally talk about himself. That task he left to others to perform. As a result Philip’s followers and associates knew very little about the personal history of the man they admired. What was more he was senior to them, even by a few years. Thus there was no source for such vital information. And though he also went abroad for his higher studies, instead of Oxford, Cambridge or the London School of Economics, he preferred the USA, where he spent six years from 1922 to 1928. If this was not a lonely furrow, it was an unusual one. And he combined several ventures in his performance. He set up a commercial firm in New York to import rubber to the USA from his father’s rubber lands. He secured a “Black-Belt” in Karate. And he made a serious study of Spanish to deepen connections with Mexico, where revolution was stirring.

When Philip left New York for London in 1928 he had become a convinced Socialist and had formed links with the Anti-Imperialist League in America. This was an organisation formed by the Communist International for linking together prominent intellectuals, men of letters and artists, and prominent nationalist figures in the anti-imperialist movement. Philip was nowhere near such high rank personalities, but was an activist engaged in fervent struggle against imperialism. On arrival in London he contacted the League officials and set out to work along with them. His father expected Philip to return to Ceylon after a brief visit to England. But he soon got so immersed in work with the League, the London Branch of the Indian National Congress and work among the Indian students, that he decided to stay in Britain. As a result his father decided to stop the allowances he had been sending from home.

The four years that Philip remained in England, from 1928 to 1932, moulded him into a powerful agitator. He became a regular speaker in Hyde Park and a propagandist very much in demand in different parts of the country. But, unfortunately this period coincided with the Communist Party’s extreme adventurism inaugurated by the Comintern in 1928. This brought out the worst in his personality, making him aggressive in relationships and even went to the employment of violence. None of the facts, especially the meritorious ones were known until recently. Thanks to the diligent search of police records in Britain and the USA by an American researcher, Wesley Ervin (especially after the opening to the public of files in 1997 kept by Scotland Yard) the full range of Philip’s activities has been laid bare. This research is now being published in Sri Lanka and is now available to would-be readers of what is undoubtedly an illuminating chapter of revolutionary history in our country.

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Philip Gunawardena: The Making of a Revolutionary

Charles Wesley Ervin

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