

# HECTOR ABHAYAVARDHANA: THE QUINTESSENTIAL PROGRESSIVE

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Hector Abhayavardhana, 2001, *Hector Abhayavardhana: Selected Writings*, Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 415 pp, Rs. 650.00

It was just over an year ago that Regi Siriwardena in his book *Working Underground. The LSSP in Wartime* lamented over the creative sterility of the early LSSP leadership. As if in answer to this effrontery we now have 415 pages of some 59 Selected Writings, an Introduction and a Background Note to boot from the bank of LSSP theoretician Hector Abhayavardhana who has, at long last, let the Social Scientists' Association come up with the publication entitled *Hector Abhayavardhana: Selected Writings*.

Of the LSSP old guard few remain. As Hector is getting on in years it is just as well that these writings have been released in the form of a handy book during Hector's lifetime, so that he could refute any misunderstandings that could arise from typographical errors that may have crept in, in compiling this work. For example, I could well visualize the pique of some LSSP oldsters when they read the inadvertence on page 345 where in the section on "Free Market" Hector says "Considerable sections of the LSSP's followers and even of its leadership had their interest rooted in the free market." LSSP here should read SLFP! Hector is well equipped to smother any howls of protest from that quarter.

However, it is perhaps such inadvertence that made a middlerunger of the LSSP only the other day, refer to Hector as being "now the high priest of capitalism," perhaps responding somewhat unkindly to the pragmatic and realistic approach Hector advocates in a changing world scenario.

For those who have any doubts about the great doings of Hector Abhayavardhana in furthering the cause of Socialism in India and Ceylon under British rule and after, this two-part publication is ample proof of the privations he had undergone in his youthful days in pursuing that mission. Having left his home to India in those war years in the cassock of an Anglican high priest (that overworked phrase again) with the *Das Capital* in the jacket of the Holy Bible perhaps, he had no home to return to if not for the chance meeting with Kusala, his future wife, in New Delhi in 1959, who brought about a change in his lifestyle leading to the setting up of a new home in Colombo which he gratefully acknowledges in dedicating his work to her memory.

In retrospect, much has been written about the romantic vision of those who formed the BLPI. Since Hector's political activity

intensified with his integration in the Bombay Unit of the BLPI the formation of the BLPI serves as the point of departure for the Introduction thus:

At a conference in Ceylon of 3 groups of Indian Trotskyists and representatives of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party in April 1941, the decision was taken to work towards immediate amalgamation of the participants in a united party. A Formative Committee was set up for the purpose, which was able to announce by April 1942 the formation of a new party by the name of the Bolshevick-Leninist Party of India (BLPI). K. Tilak (Leslie Gunawardena) was appointed as the General Secretary of the BLPI with headquarters in Bombay. The party was announced as a branch of the 4<sup>th</sup> International.

Part 1 of the book is a collection of Hector's selected writings on the Indian political scene. They spill over to the post-1959 period when his comments are no longer ringside for he was safely ensconced in Ceylon by then, but are still valid on a wide range of subjects that include "Indo-Ceylon Relations," "The limitations of greatness of Jawaharlal Nehru," an in-depth study of the consolidation of nationhood in India covering a 25-year period from 1947-1972 etc. Hector characterizes the Indira Gandhi phenomenon as the re-emergence of history. There is an article on the Rajiv Murder and a short study of Caste and Class in Indian elections written in 1993 rounding off Part 1. Part 2 is a formidable collection of Hector's writings on the local scene covering the political history of Sri Lanka seen from the standpoint of a Marxist. He applies Marxist theory in analyzing the "Categories of Left Thinking in Ceylon." If the profiles of comrades Nihal Perera, D.G. William and others precede those of N.M. Perera, Doric de Souza and the like this fits in with the chronology of events.

In the article "Marxism and some features of the LSSP," which is a reproduction of a paper read at a seminar on Marxism at the University of Peradeniya in 1993, Hector applies Marxian theory to analyze the phenomenon of the emergence of a Sinhala state. In the concluding paragraph he says:

In a disintegrating society the bourgeois intelligentsia—English speaking, cosmopolitan and consumer-oriented—could not hold aloft the ideal of a united nation. The more traditional rural intelligentsia could advance in such conditions a claim to control the state in the name of the rural poor.

The links of the urban workers with house-property and land in the rural areas permitted the consolidation of a grand alliance of small traders, petty renters, small farmers and wage and salary earners, in a search for access to the resources of patronage in possession of the state. In the course of this endeavour, what was set up for the purpose of a future nation, ended in caricature as a Sinhalese state.

The LSSP if not a party to this turn of events was perhaps a helpless witness to it, for Hector says, "The LSSP might have been able to halt this proceeding disintegration if the urban workers could have provided it with a strong enough base to stand on."

The relentless campaigner for the unity of all anti-UNP forces, T.B. Illangaratne, has quite rightfully earned a place in this publication. Analyzing the *goviya* and the *sangha* in the Kandyan region and their characteristics, Hector surmises that "one of the

destabilizers of the MEP united front was its attempt at land reform." Overall, Hector Abhayavardhana makes no bones about the fact that policies and strategies must change to meet the challenges presented by the changes in the world economic order. This may seem to be a complete turn-around from the position the LSSP held in the 1930s, but Hector states that the party needed the testing ground of experience to change its attitudes. He commends the Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga government for having understood the need to remould economic policy in keeping with the new trends of integration and globalization.

Back safely in Sri Lanka, Hector reminiscences with the wisdom of age that he left for India, along with several leading LSSP members, in what today appears to have been a romantic endeavour to build a single Trotskyist political party for both India and Ceylon. Leaving Hector to continue battling with himself, let's return to Regi to sum it all up: "... they were also human beings, subject to the imperfections inherent in being human." ■

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