

The impact of the Russian Revolution in Ceylon

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It was not until eighteen years after the October Revolution of 1917 that the first Marxist-led political party appeared on the Ceylon scene. This was in striking contrast to other Asian countries, where soon after the revolution small groups of Marxists began to organize.

The new Soviet government had adopted a policy of encouraging revolution in colonial territories and in the early twenties there were active Communist organizations in India, China, Korea, Malaya, Indonesia and Japan. Lenin on many occasions proclaimed his faith in the revolutionary potential of the Asian masses: "the hundreds of millions of toilers of Asia," whose movement for liberation "no power on earth could stop." In 1919, a Russian political commentator predicted that "the liberation of India from British domination would be a signal for a whole series of Asian countries to take up the struggle against imperialism," and in 1920, the Second Congress of the Communist International decided actively to support liberation movements in Asia.

Not only were two Asians, Sen Katayama of Japan and M.N. Roy of India, on the Executive Committee of the Communist International as early as 1921 and 1922 respectively, but some of the most dynamic of the early Communist leaders were also Asians: Mao Tsetung, Ho Chi Minh, along with M.N. Roy.

Two interesting questions arise concerning Ceylon and the October Revolution. First, did the revolution make any impact at all on public opinion in Ceylon in the years after 1917? Second, why unlike the experience of other Asian countries was there no Marxist movement in Ceylon in the twenties?

At the time of the October Revolution, there were two distinct strands of nationalism, of which the moderate group (Sir James Pieris, H.J.C. Pereira, D.B. Jayatilaka, F.R. Senanayake, and others) believed in agitating for political reforms in a constitutional manner using memorials and deputations as methods of action. Their political aim was a greater measure of responsible government based on a limited franchise. This group, which was influenced by British institutions and British political thought, showed hostility to the events of the Russian Revolution.

In contrast, there were the anti-imperialist radicals (among them A.E. Goonesinha, Victor Corea, E.A.P. Wijeyeratna and A.P. Thambyah), who had formed the Young Lanka League in 1915. They were inspired by the Indian, Irish and Egyptian nationalist movements against the British and, repudiating constitutional methods as ineffective, they advocated such tactics as civil disobedience, boycott and passive resistance. Their target was complete self-government based on universal suffrage, but there was no call for violent resistance and the radicals had no mass following. But the enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution came from the members of the Young Lanka League who were political rebels, challengers of orthodoxy and founders of militant trade unionism. However, the feelings released in 1917 among these radicals were mainly emotional, and did not lead to

revolutionary activity on an organized basis.

It should be remembered that after the riots of 1915, there was an increase in nationalist feeling, and that public opinion was not confined to the English-speaking but also extended to the literate sections of the Sinhalese masses. The English and Sinhalese daily newspapers of the time used to carry long dispatches of foreign news; the events of the First World War, the formation of the Kerensky government in Russia and the Bolshevik revolution which overthrew Kerensky were reported in great detail in the press.

Press Reaction

In 1917, there were four English dailies in Ceylon, two of them British-owned: the Times of Ceylon, the paper read by the British bureaucrats, planters and merchants and by a section of the Ceylonese, many of whom — according to H.A.J. Hulugalle — used to leave a copy of the Times on the verandah “to impress visitors”; and the Ceylon Observer, associated with the Ferguson family.

It was only to be expected that these two papers were concerned not only about the revolutionary changes in Russia, but also about the Russian withdrawal from the war against Germany. The Times of Ceylon in November 1917 described the Soviet government as “an irresponsible Nihilist dictatorship whose regime may be very short-lived indeed.”

The Ceylon Observer was no less strong in its condemnation of the October Revolution. Commenting on “the bad news from Russia,” the Observer claimed that because of the revolution, Russia was prey to an anarchy that was worse than autocratic monarchy, adding: “The future for Russia remains infinitely blacker than when the Romanoff regime was in force.” Both newspapers severely condemned the Soviet leaders, and a few days after the revolution the Times wrote:

Despite their ignorance... it is scarcely credible that the Russian people will continue to place reliance in a man of the type of Lenin, who apart from his wild and unbalanced ideas, is by no means free of the suspicion of being the recipient of German gold.

The Ceylon Observer, almost as soon as the news of the revolution reached Ceylon, denounced the Bolsheviks as “nothing more than German agents, rank extremists... ambitious and ignorant fanatics,” and referred to “Leninists in the pay of Germany who were prepared to sell their country to the Germans.”

The reaction of the Ceylonese-owned daily press was equally hostile to the Bolsheviks and reflected the views of the moderate Ceylonese. The Ceylon Leader — owned by a syndicate of wealthy Ceylonese — described the “dark and dismal happenings” in Russia as a “disaster of great magnitude,” and warned that after the overthrow of Kerensky by the “forces of chaos,” a witches’ cauldron had begun to boil in Russia.

The fourth English daily, The Ceylonese (started by P. Ramanathan in 1913), deplored the revolution, saying: “The worst has happened in Russia.” This paper made very regular comments on the events in Russia, and referring to the Soviet leaders as fanatics who had “mistaken anarchy for liberty,” predicted that the fall of Lenin was “only a question of time.”

The Ceylonese showed particular resentment at the revolutionary challenge to authority, and an indignant editorial said:

When the local Council of Soldiers and Workers Delegates can coolly require the Petrograd garrison not to execute orders other than those approved by the delegates, things must have come to a pretty pass in Russia.

A further source of alarm was the attack on private property;

On 11 November 1917 The Ceylonese commented on the slogan “land to the peasants” and claimed that the “middle class and the landed aristocracy would not let this sorry triumph of ultra-Communist principles go unchallenged.”

Sinhalese Press

All the Sinhalese papers of the time also published long news reports on the events in Russia. Dailies, like Lakmina and Dinamina, Gnanartha Pradeepaya and the Buddhist Sarasavi Sandaresa, had news of Russia in almost every issue of 1917. But there was hardly any editorial comment on the revolution. This may have been because the Sinhalese public were thought to be less interested than the English-speaking elite in the news of wars and revolutions in Europe; it may have also been a result of the 1915 period of unrest when the editors of several Sinhalese papers were prosecuted for sedition and their papers were banned.

For example, The Sinhala Bauddhaya, the most forthright Sinhalese journal associated with Anagarika Dharmapala, and the Sinhala Jathiya, edited by Piyadasa Sirisena, had been banned in 1915, and even in 1917 they had not reappeared. The opinion of the Sinhalese radical press was, therefore, not voiced on the subject of the October Revolution of 1917; but the viewpoint of the moderate Ceylonese was expressed in the Dinamina by Rev. J.S. de Silva, the Methodist clergyman who wrote a regular column of “War Notes.” He denounced Lenin as “a traitor who had been secretly under German instructions.”

Revolution and World War

It is understandable that the moderate Ceylonese — influenced as they were by British liberalism — should view the Russian Revolution and its attack on private property with alarm. It is also not surprising that this section of the Ceylonese should closely associate itself with the British during the First World War, and that it should cooperate with the war effort in Europe.

In 1917, several Ceylonese-owned newspapers and journals denounced Russia’s withdrawal from the World War after the revolution. The National Monthly of Ceylon, run by moderate Ceylonese nationalists, expressed concern that the Russian Revolution had “upset all previous calculations” and damaged “the allied cause.” This journal went so far as to identify Ceylon with the allies, urging the Ceylonese that “we can and must win even without Russia.”

The Ceylon Saturday Review, a popular weekly, commented in November 1917 on “chaos in Russia” and showed alarm over the “serious revolt in Petrograd and the shameful retreat of troops at the front.” The Ceylonese complained that the Russians had “betrayed the cause of the allies.” The Rev. de Silva, in the Dinamina, condemning Russia’s withdrawal, said: “apart from the serious blow this presents to the allies, the Russians in their blindness do not see the harm they are doing themselves.”

It was no doubt the British ‘attitude’ to the revolution that influenced the moderate Ceylonese, and many of the opinions voiced in Ceylon journals on the October Revolution were taken directly from the British press. The young Ceylonese radicals, who were less attached to the British liberal tradition, went against the current of middle-class opinion and boldly welcomed the Russian Revolution. To the radicals, the revolution was a stirring event which aroused strong emotional responses. In the political vocabulary of the radicals, the government of the Czars served as an example of the worst kind of oppression.

For example, in 1902 Anagarika Dharmapala juxtaposed British and Czarist rule when he wrote:

Finland is under despotic Russia and the beautiful island of Ceylon is under the imperialism of England.

It was not ideological affinity to Marxism nor the socialist measures of the new Soviet government that inspired the radicals, but rather the collapse of Czarist tyranny to which they had always been opposed, and the end of a hated despotism.

An active member of the Young Lanka League, Valentine Perera, writing eight months after the Revolution, in the League's journal, Young Lanka, on "A Vision of the Future," claimed that Russia would "once more emerge into public notice now that the Russians have recognised the veritable stability of a government of the people, for the people." A few years later in 1922, the Young Lanka praised the new regime in Russia:

Czardom that for ages manacled human liberty has vanished from unhappy Russia with the heralding of the dawn of a better day.

A.E. Goonesinha was the first person to give a sympathetic interpretation of the Russian Revolution to the Ceylon working class. In 1922, Goonesinha, Victor Corea and other Young Lanka radicals formed the Ceylon Labour Union, which immediately captured the support of the urban working class. A.E. Goonesinha, writing in 1922, claimed that the worker would only be able to free himself from the 'tyranny of the capitalist' by resorting to strikes: "Today [the worker] is a power in England and in Russia he rules. Thus far he has advanced not by the benevolence of the capitalist, but with the aid of the grand and all-powerful weapon, strikes."

Goonesinha became a militant strike leader and the undisputed hero of the Colombo proletariat. In 1923 Goonesinha's new union brought the economic life of the city to a standstill by a general strike involving 20,000 workers. The Ceylon Labour Union also started the first workers' newspaper in Ceylon, the Kamkaru Handa (Workers' Voice), edited by Goonesinha, and it was in this paper that articles in Sinhalese on Lenin and the Russian Revolution began to appear.

In 1925, the Kamkaru Handa ran two biographical articles on "Lenin - the Brave leader who brought liberty to the Russians." What is striking is that, though the articles did not discuss the policy of the Soviet government, Lenin was lavishly praised. To Goonesinha, Lenin was the hero of the oppressed classes, to be admired for his "manly lion-like qualities and strong personality."

In the Kamkaru Handa, Lenin was also described as the vanquisher of the hated Czarist regime, who by his remarkable aptitude had transformed the Russian government into a workers' government:

A few years ago there was a worldwide sensation about Lenin. Though the working classes looked up to him with great affection, the so-called high and mighty insulted and denigrated him. The main reason for this hostility was that Lenin crushed and destroyed the oppressive Czarist government which had tyrannised the Russian Empire. For a long time the Czar governed the country by cruelly oppressing the helpless masses. It was the courageous Lenin who formed the Bolshevik government which rules Russia today.

Moreover, in contrast to the Ceylon moderates' assessment of the World War, A.E. Goonesinha's paper put forward another viewpoint:

Lenin revealed how the World War was begun by the powerful nations which wanted to loot the wealth of weak nations, and by the rich, who wanted to grab the possessions of the poor.

Absence of Marxism

This brings us to the second question raised in this article: why, in spite of the radicals' sympathy for the revolution, did no Marxist movement arise in Ceylon in the 1920s? To a question like this it is difficult to give a definite answer and one can only suggest a few possibilities.

It may have been that class consciousness did not exist and that conditions were, therefore, not ripe for the development of a Communist party; but it is evident that the potential leadership of a left-wing party could only come from the radicals, who formed such a tiny minority of the elite.

The working class was also at an early stage of its development and sought no more than the right of trade union organization and of obtaining concessions through trade union agitation. What the urban workers in the early twenties sought was a militant leadership to challenge the employers, rather than revolutionary leaders who would wipe away the employers altogether. The key figures one must therefore consider are the nationalists of the Young Lanka League and their most militant spokesman, A.E. Goonesinha.

If a Marxist party had arisen in the early twenties it would have clearly been led by the Young Lanka group. But the members of this group — who had expressed admiration for Lenin and the revolution — were content to remain a radical pressure group within the moderate Ceylon National Congress.

A.E. Goonesinha, from being the militant working class leader with no particular ideological commitment in the early twenties, became the leading social democrat in Ceylon in the late twenties. He made close contacts with the British Labour Party, acting as one of the hosts to Ramsay MacDonald (Party leader) who visited Ceylon in 1926. In 1928 Goonesinha attended the Commonwealth Labour Conference in London, where he was welcomed and feted by Labour MPs and trade union leaders, who succeeded in persuading him not to accept the invitation to the Communist-sponsored Conference of the League Against Imperialism.

Goonesinha was also dissuaded by Labour MPs from meeting the Communist MP for Battersea, S. Saklatvala, who was an Indian. Soon after his return from England, Goonesinha, following the advice of his Labour Party friends, formed a Ceylon Labour Party and an All-Ceylon Trade Union Congress.

By 1928 revolutionary ideas and methods of action were expressly renounced by Goonesinha, who declared that the Ceylon Labour Party was a social democratic party which believed that "the freedom of the country must be achieved by evolution and not by revolution." Goonesinha also claimed that his unions were not "revolutionary or Communist organisations," and when criticism was levelled against the union's volunteer corps of Red Shirts, Goonesinha retorted that they wore red because it was the colour of the labour movement the world over and had nothing to do with Communism.

Police Vigilance

Another important reason for the lack of support for Communism was the ease with which the police could prevent 'subversive ideas' penetrating a small island. Because of strict police vigilance, there was no contact between the international Communist movement and Goonesinha's Labour Union, or even between Goonesinha and the Indian Communists.

The Inspector-General of Police at the time was the hawk-eyed, formidable Herbert Dowbiggin, who succeeded not only in stopping the dissemination of Marxist ideas, but also in prohibiting foreign Communists from visiting Ceylon. A close watch was kept on incoming foreign mail, and Dowbiggin admitted that "Bolshevik literature from India and Europe" addressed to A.E. Goonesinha was intercepted.

Police security measures even involved deportations; and when D.M. Manilal, an Indian barrister

who had led agitation among Indian immigrant workers in Fiji, arrived in Ceylon in 1922, the police promptly deported him because of his Communist affiliations.

Even the activities of the Buddhist leader, Anagarika Dharmapala, were carefully noted, and when he left Ceylon in 1925, the police raised the alarm that he was probably making a trip "with the object of getting in touch with M.N. Roy, the notorious Indian Bolshevik and publisher of revolutionary papers in Berlin."

In spite of the absence of a Marxist group, the Bolshevik scare was raised many times during the twenties. In 1923, during the general strike, the Governor inquired if there was any connection between this strike and "Communist propaganda in Malaya." Individual employers also raised alarms; in 1923 a well-known Ceylonese employer claimed that "Bolshevik ideas were being put into the minds of the workers," and in 1928, during a wave of strikes in Colombo, he complained of "this Bolshevik rule over the proletariat."

Even the conservative papers in Britain claimed that the 1928-29 strikes in Colombo were due to the influence of Moscow. These were clearly alarmist responses to working-class agitation and a misuse of the word 'Bolshevik' to describe any form of agitation. Dowbiggin was perhaps more realistic in his approach when he said in 1923 that Communist ideas were distasteful to the Ceylonese elite because "they like making money and buying land and houses more than anything else."

Early Marxists

But the situation was to change, and though A.E. Goonesinha boasted in 1929 that there was "fortunately no Red propaganda in Ceylon and no one need be alarmed," within the next three years Marxists began to organize in Ceylon. Goonesinha, the radical of the early 1920s when he bitterly opposed the moderates, had become a moderate himself a decade later and faced a challenge from the new radicals. These were the Marxists who had returned from abroad in the early thirties: Philip Gunawardena, Dr N.M. Perera, Dr Colvin R. de Silva, Dr S.A. Wickremasinghe, and Leslie Goonewardena.

While in London, they had worked with various left-wing groups and on their return they joined the Youth Leagues, a new radical nationalist movement inspired by Indian nationalism. The Marxists soon made their presence felt in Colombo and began to preach and write on Marxism and the experience of the USSR. Unlike the radicals of the early twenties, whose reaction to the Russian Revolution was primarily a feeling of elation that Czarism had been overthrown, the new radicals advocated a socialist form of society inspired by Marxist ideology.

In 1932, Dr Colvin R. de Silva, who had visited the Soviet Union in 1931, wrote an article on Communism in the *Young Ceylon* (the Youth League journal). The same year Robin Ratnam, in the article "The Need for a Planned National Life" argued that economic planning was "the most significant lesson the outside world was learning from the great social experiment in Russia"; he claimed that the youth of Ceylon also had a great opportunity to create "a new social order."

The columns of the *Young Ceylon* from 1932 onwards contained constant references to Marx and Lenin. One review of Lenin's speeches stated: "No speeches in recent times can have a greater interest than those of the greatest moral force in the proletarian revolution, Lenin." Another review recommended *Socialism and War* because the book provided "a glimpse into the alert, resourceful and clear mind of Lenin."

Clearly, there was a marked difference between the Ceylon scene in 1922, when the *Young Lanka* had praised the Russian Revolution, and the position ten years later when the *Young Ceylon* began

to advocate Marxism. By 1932 conditions were far more favourable for an acceptance of Marxist ideology. There was a heightened political awareness, since not only were elections under universal suffrage held for the first time in 1931, but the working class had also become a strong force in the late twenties.

In addition, the severe economic depression of these years tended to convince the radicals of the bankruptcy of capitalism, and the return of the Marxist students provided the necessary intellectual leadership for a new political movement.

How did this group of Marxists differ in outlook from the earlier radicals? The divergence of opinion was evident on two important issues: the political reforms proposed by the Donoughmore Commission, and the leadership of the trade union movement.

Unlike A.E. Goonesinha, who cooperated with the Donoughmore Commissioners and welcomed the reforms, the Ceylon Marxists were very critical of the proposals, as they were a far cry from self-government. While in England they had a series of discussions on the reforms with Krishna Menon and the Communist MP Saklatvala, and a report of these discussions was issued as a pamphlet by Dr. Wickremasinghe and Krishna Menon.

The Marxist group also had to take a stand on A.E. Goonesinha, whose Labour Union had led the Colombo workers from 1922 until the depression, and whose Labour Party had been the most radical force in Ceylon politics. Philip Gunawardena, writing in 1931, analyzed the role of Goonesinha, praising him for being a man of "tremendous initiative and daring," but criticized his failure to give the workers the revolutionary leadership they needed. Moreover, Goonesinha was treated with suspicion by the Marxists because of his links with the British Labour Party. Ramsay MacDonald and Drummond Shiell (the Labour MP on the Donoughmore Commission) were alleged to have introduced him to "the wonders of Fabian mysticism," and British trade union leaders were said to have turned Goonesinha into a "devout apostle of industrial peace and a class collaborator."

The strongly worded condemnations reflected the bitterness of feeling between the Marxists and the social democrats. Philip Gunawardena stated that Goonesinha, who had risen to power "on the shoulders of the workers," was looking around "for an official position in the framework of imperialism," and he accused the British Labour government of making "the temptations doubly attractive."

The turning point had come and the labour movement of the twenties had to face a severe challenge from the Marxists. Up to 1935, the Marxists were active in the nationalist Youth Leagues, campaigning for complete political independence for the country. Through the Youth Leagues they also made their influence felt on three important issues. The Marxists took over the Suriya Mal movement (the anti-poppy-day campaign) and made it a platform for anti-British propaganda. Second, during the Malaria epidemic of 1934, the Marxists played a very active part in the distress relief. In addition, between 1933 and 1935, they gained valuable experience in trade union agitation, the most notable struggle being the takeover of trade union leadership from A.E. Goonesinha during the historic strike at the Wellawatte Spinning and Weaving Mills in 1933.

By 1935 the Marxists were ready to branch out into independent political activity and it was in December of that year — nearly two decades after the Russian Revolution that Ceylon's first Marxist party, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, was formed.

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