

The Bracegirdle embarrassment in colonial Ceylon (Sri Lanka)

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“Friends, you have dark skins, but white hearts- while my people here have white skins but their hearts are packed with black treason of such a nature that even an infected rat would despise to dwell in their ‘hearts’”

—Bracegirdle addressing a group of estate workers

Mark Anthony Lyster Bracegirdle began his career as a trainee at Relugas Estate in Madulkele, in Matale District, under Superintendent H D Thomas. The horrible condition of the estate workers life really shocked him. The imported ‘shipments’ of labour from South India had to walk hundreds of miles from Thalaimannar to the central hills, a tough trek across the country’s dry zone where thousands died on the way.

Don Philip Rupasinhe Gunawardena, the son of Boralugoda Ralahamy of Awissawella, was a student of Economics at the University of Illinois in America. Philip later travelled to Britain where he met a few local students at London University including Colvin R de Silva, Nanayakkarage Martin Perera and Leslie Goonewardena all being students of Professor Harold Lasky the Marxist. They became the members of an international socialite organisation named League Against Imperialism and For National Independence. Returning to the motherland in the mid-1930s, they formed the LSSP (Lanka Sama Samaja Party) and contested four seats in the 1936 parliamentary election winning two seats. Philip Gunawardena and N M Perera were elected to represent Awissawella and Ruwanwella in the State Council.

Bracegirdle, born in England in 1912, migrated to Sydney with parents and studied Agriculture. He joined the Communist Party of Australia before he sailed for Ceylon to learn tea planting. The British planters in the tea estate areas lived a luxury life on posh bungalows with several servants while the workers were treated appallingly in cattle-shed-type line rooms. They were deprived of proper health services and education. Good-looking and very young female workers were compelled to provide sexual favours to the planters.

Injustice

Bracegirdle experienced numerous instances of unfair treatment meted out to the poor workers by the European planters. His boss, Thomas, would go to the line rooms to force the workers to go to work despite some suffering from malaria or its effects. Thomas would be adamant about them picking tea. They prevented the children from going to school, instead wanted them to work in the estate. When Bracegirdle protested, Thomas had told: “Learning was only copying us, and it does them no good at all and worse it will give them ideas in later life.”

Thomas admonished him for keeping a close association with the coolies. Bracegirdle’s stubbornness created trouble in the estate. He fought for workers’ rights when Thomas discontinued the service of

some labourers who had close dealings with Bracegirdle, compelling the management not only to sack him unceremoniously but give him a ticket to return to Australia. Bracegirdle left the estate and travelled to Colombo where he met the LSSP stalwarts and joined the organisation as an activist.

Bracegirdle became an asset to the young Marxists of Samasamajist anti-colonial activities, who contributed regularly to their newsprint, while the CID kept a watchful eye on the LSSP's behaviour. The young activist played a leading role in organising a public rally on Galle Face Green summoned by LSSP in January 1937 to celebrate Sir Dowbiggin's departure. The atrocities committed during Dowbiggin's tenure as IGP during the 1915 riots prompted them to hold it. In March, the same year he was admitted to the politburo of the party.

The LSSP had a public meeting in Colombo in November 1937, where Bracegirdle was billed to speak. Colvin R de Silva, the president of the party who was in the chair, introduced him as the first white comrade ever to address a party meeting. This was followed by quite a few meetings held at various locations in the city. Later he travelled to Nawalapitiya to join a trade union organised by the plantation's workers, where a senior LSSPer, Dr NM Perera, introduced him to the crowd as a white comrade who generously consented to work for them. The crowds were overjoyed when Bracegirdle announced that they are well organised to fight the whites with two of their members already in the State Council, and also several lawyers who will appear free of charge for labour cases. CID sleuths kept a close watch on the proceedings and reported directly not only the words spoken by Bracegirdle but the workers' response to the IGP. Governor Stubbs duly signed an order on April 20 to deport Bracegirdle which was served on him two days later. He was allowed only two days to pack his bags as passage had been booked for him already.

The LSSP took a decision to act against this order and to hide the man. The job was entrusted with Philip's Brother Robert, a keen activist. For ten days, they hid Bracegirdle at various locations in Colombo, Lunugala and Uva. Bracegirdle, disguised as a woman, travelled with Samasamajist comrades. In Colombo, Robert left Bracegirdle at a house at Kosgashandiya, Grandpass. From there, after a few days, Bracegirdle was taken to Kaduwela where he remained until May 5. The LSSP drummed up support for cancelling the deportation order. The May Day procession was full of hoardings that read "Keep Bracegirdle - Deport Stubbs". Finally, they announced that Bracegirdle would appear at a mass rally on Galle Face Green H D Thomas.

The deportation order was debated by State Council on May 4 and 5, in which several members spoke in support of the motion criticising the Governor for acting on contrary to the constitution.

State Council Debate

Siripala Samarakody:

"HE the Governor had acted unconstitutionally and in violation of the expressed terms of the constitution that has been granted to us by the Donoughmore Commission, and as such, such action shall be condemned by this house, should not be tolerated in this country, and every protest must be made in order to safeguard the rights and liberties of the subjects.

There has been a gross violation, a gross abuse, a gross invasion. If we allow this action to go unchallenged, and if we do not exert all powers that is within us to see that orders are rescinded it will be very unsafe for us. It is very clear that there is no vestige of responsible government in the country."

George E de Silva:

"...and today thanks to the activities of the Samasamaja Party, an unfortunate person called

Mr Bracegirdlea pure Englishmen, a man who has been born and bred in a land of liberties comes to this country and feels that an injustice is being done to the people of this country and tries to bring to the minds of the English people who are in the country their responsibility towards the people.

For stating that he wants fair play and justice done to the people of this country, he is to be bundled out. Is that British justice?" Hansard - May 4, 1937: folio 919

A few nominated Europeans spoke defending the action of Governor Stubbs. However, it was passed with only six "Noes" against 34 "Ayes" which included GG Ponnambalam, S W R D Bandaranaike, Susantha de Fonseka, R S Tennakoon, D M Rajapaksa, Siripala Samarakkody, George E de Silva, A E Goonesinghe, Philip Gunawardena and N M Perera. The LSSP leaders left the chamber immediately to attend the mass rally at Galle Face Green. Robert Gunawardena drove his car through the police cordon and stopped near the platform to let the 'wanted' man out. The Young Anglo-Australian, Bracegirdle, appeared in person on stage.

"He was castigated a traitor because he took the side of the oppressed masses the British Raj violated the Indian Labourers' Wages ordinance. Liberty and justice cannot be decided by colour", thundered the LSSPers.

Deportation invalidated

The Police did not attempt to arrest him in the midst of a massive crowd. Later while staying at an LSSP leader's house, the Police took him, planning to put him on board the steamer. HV Perera, a senior civil lawyer assisted by 30-year old Colvin, applied for a writ of habeas corpus. The lawyers offered services free. A bench of three judges issued judgment: "... the deportation order was illegal," humiliating the colonial government.

The case received extensive publicity through the British Empire. Governor Stubbs resigned on June 30 to be replaced by Caldecott. IGP Banks was removed. The Bracegirdle embarrassment caused such an upsurge of opinion that Governor Caldecott commenced the process of constitutional reforms leading to the establishment of Soulbury Constitution.

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