

## REVOLUTIONARY TRAILS: EDMUND SAMARAKKODY: A POLITICAL PROFILE

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D. Wijeratne

Beginning in the early 1930s Edmund Samarakkody was associated with the working-class movement and Marxist politics in Sri Lanka, not merely during the forward sweep of its heyday, but importantly during its times of crisis and retreat. Adhering to the fundamental principles and practice of Marxism-Leninism, he participated to the end of his life in the working class led anti-capitalist struggle, for the overthrow of capitalism-imperialism and its replacement by an international socialist order.

Inspired in his youth by the tumultuous tramway strike in 1929, during which workers burned down the Maradana Police Station and law students with flags and red sashes demonstrated in sympathy with the strikers, Edmund sat down to write a leaflet entitled, "Students of Ceylon Arise." Urging the workers to fight he exhorted the students to give "up their splendour and come out to the streets and join the workers to save the destruction of civilisation and bring universal equality, happiness and prosperity."

A youthful cry indeed! Many an impressionable young man of his age might have been similarly inspired, even if they had not put down their feelings in so many words. How many nevertheless would have clung to their thoughts and developed them into maturity, over a span of 60 years?

In point of fact, most of the one-time stalwarts of the Left movement itself with whom Edmund had collaborated fell by the wayside, each in his own time, and succumbed to the established social order. Edmund is among the few who stood their ground. This would have been not surprising, if in the meantime the self-same issues that tormented society then had not developed into menacing proportions, both nationally and internationally. The fate of mankind is indeed more terrifying to contemplate today than it was in 1929.

As a Marxist-Leninist Edmund believed that the major problems of society, such as those of the working class, the peasantry and the oppressed and toiling masses and all forms of political and national oppression are inextricably bound up with the capitalist-imperialist world order, and that the path to their solution lay in its revolutionary overthrow through working-class struggle.

Without being merely a biographical narrative about Edmund Samarakkody, T. Perera's work serves as a welcome study to those readers interested particularly in the history of the left movement, the so-called "collapse of the left" and even "the death of communism." What had appeared to be a mass-based movement and a revolutionary Marxist party (the LSSP), making great strides in challenging the capitalist order in Sri Lanka, ended up becoming collaborators of the capitalist class, as co-partners in coalition with the SLFP, and being reduced to the position of servitors of the very same capitalist order against which they had been fighting.

Here the reader is taken back by the author to the momentous developments within the Marxist movement in the early 1940s. It is against the backdrop of the crisis of imperialism during World War II that the LSSP, formed in 1935, actually underwent a transformation in an attempt to forge itself into a revolutionary party and help build the BLPI (Bolshevik Leninist Party of India) of which the LSSP was to be its Sri Lankan section.

However, with the failure of the BLPI to utilize the momentous revolutionary possibilities opening up in 1942 in India, and the consequent emergence of a relatively settled national capitalist order under the Indian National Congress led by Gandhi, the BLPI itself broke up and immersed itself in the politics of the Congress.

The split in the local section of the BLPI itself into the reformist LSSP led by Philip and N.M. and the BSP (Bolshevik Samasamaja Party) led by the Colvin-Leslie group and the subsequent unprincipled re-unification of the two groups, as the LSSP, soon paved the way to the transformation

of the LSSP once again into a parliamentary reformist, social democratic party.

Although a Marxist tendency did emerge in the party subsequently and existed up to the 1960s, it was the reformists who managed to take over the party and the movement and eventually ended up in the coalition with the capitalist SLFP in the 1970s. Edmund all along worked within the Marxist tendency up to the split in 1964. In due course, however, with the acknowledged leadership of the revolutionary wing itself succumbing to the reformists, it was a largely a disparate section that split in 1964 to form the LSSP-R (Lanka Sama Samaja Party – Revolutionary).

Accordingly it was from 1964 onwards that Edmund's role in the Left movement begins to acquire greater significance. In Edmund's own view, as the author of the biography suggests, the crucial shift in the direction of parliamentary reformism had its origins in the late 1940s, and the coalition politics of the 1960s and 1970s were the eventual end result of that regressive process.

The role of the Marxist tendency and of Edmund himself in relation to the task of averting the rightward slide in the party from the 1940s onwards are problems that could be examined in further detail. T. Perera's book provides in particular a broad but valuable survey of the part that Edmund together

with his leftwing colleagues played in seeking to build once again a revolutionary party and movement in Sri Lanka.

As mentioned earlier, T. Perera's profile of Edmund is no run of the mill biographical narrative. Edmund's political life is here studied, as it necessarily has to be done, to render it meaningful in the context of a variety of issues affecting the international socialist movement. The author has endeavoured to do so within the ambit of a small book. He has also made use of published and unpublished material.

It might be said that it was the last twenty five years of Edmund's life that added stature and made him a more remarkable personality in the Marxist movement. He alone among the first generation leaders of the movement such as Philip, N.M., Colvin and Leslie had without succumbing to parliamentary reformism steadfastly adhered to the path of Marxism-Leninism.

In the words of his longtime comrade and collaborator Meryl Fernando in his introduction:

Edmund kept his faith in socialism. But he had to swim against the current in his attempt to build a viable political group in Sri Lanka, to help build a Trotskyist centre internationally. He remained in the arena of struggle till the end. ■

**The writer was a member of the LSSP from the 1950s to the 1964 split and subsequently a member of the LSSP-R and Revolutionary Workers Party.**

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