

HANDY PERINBANAYAGAM AND THE JAFFNA YOUTH CONGRESS

Learning lessons from an inspired era

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A remarkable achievement of the book project is the simultaneous release of Part 1 of the book in all the three languages of the land. The parity of language, India's cultural support and the occasion for learning lessons are all in keeping with the Gandhian inspiration to freedom, the inclusive nationalistic ideals and the emphasis on education and the privileging of national languages that were the hallmark of the Jaffna Youth Congress, Handy Perinbanayagam and his illustrious contemporaries.

The short lived history of the Youth Congress is forever associated with introduction of universal franchise in 1931. In an act of inspired notoriety, the Youth Congress spearheaded Jaffna's boycott of Sri Lanka's inaugural election to the State Council established under the Donoughmore Constitution and involving one of the early exercises of universal voting rights anywhere in the world. The Youth Congress like many others rejected the Donoughmore Constitution for falling short of full independence, but only the Congress translated its rejection into practical action.

The 1931 boycott and its consequences

The circumstances of the boycott and the intended and unintended consequences that flowed from it for Tamil politics as well as national politics offer many lessons about Tamil society and politics as well as their creative and destructive tensions with Sri Lankan society and politics. The Memorial Volume chronicles the circumstances and the events of a brief but tumultuous period in the history of Tamil political society without embellishment and faithful to the dictum that "facts are sacred." It is for others to connect the plethora of dots in the subsequent evolution of Tamil politics and develop critical perspectives for historical analysis and prognosis.

At the height of the 1931 boycott, the leading lights of the Jaffna Youth Congress (JYC), including Handy Perinbanayagam (HP, 1899-1977) were just over or under

30 years in age. Perhaps naming the organization as 'Youth Congress', was a reflection of the youthfulness of its founders. It was unique in that it was a youth organization without allegiance to any parent organization. In fact, it was its own parent organization challenging in every way the established orthodoxy of Jaffna society, especially its casteism. The JYC leaders were committed to non-violence and democratic values.

Despite being called the Jaffna Youth Congress, the organization was anything but peninsular in outlook and stood for a free and united Lanka committed to universal values and ideals. The use of the place name (Jaffna) in the title was mostly geographical identification without political connotations. The linguistic emphasis was on privileging national languages (Tamil and Sinhalese) as opposed to English, and not as the basis for narrow linguistic nationalism. It is also significant that the JYC founders were inspired by Gandhian ideals of all-India nationalism rather than the anti-Brahminical but pro-colonial politics of the Justice Party in Madras, precursor to South Indian Tamil nationalism.

As Silan Kadirgamar has noted, the boycott activities of the JYC did not go unnoticed in the South. Philip Gunawardena described the JYC as the only organization "displaying political intelligence" and called on the rest of the country to follow the lead Jaffna was giving. Four years later in the midst of founding the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, Colvin R. de Silva declared that the roots of the LSSP were inasmuch in the JYC in the North, as they were in the Suriya Mal movement in the South.

But whereas the LSSP was able to build a mass base and become a force to be reckoned with in the South and to a lesser extent in the North, the JYC had disappeared even before the arrival of the LSSP. Counterfactually, it could be asked if the JYC leaders had contested the 1931 election, the course of Tamil politics would have been different. As it turned out, none of the JYC founders was able to win an election and become a parliamentarian. A number of them

contested in elections after independence as candidates of either of the two Left parties.

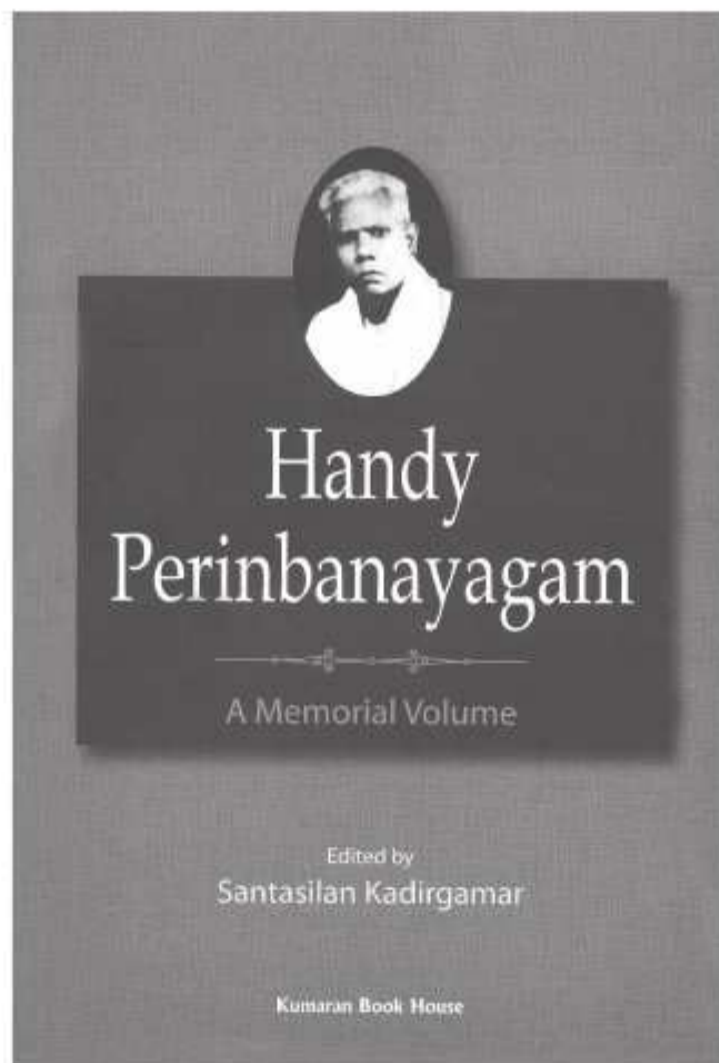
The boycott of the elections in Jaffna reduced Tamil representation in the State Council, the outcome was not popular in Jaffna after the euphoria over the boycott ended, and the JYC ended up paying the ultimate price for it. In the South, outside of the Left circles, the boycott was misinterpreted as a response to the failure to secure communal representation even though none of the JYC leaders ever had any truck with the school of communal representation. The fact of the matter is that the first State Council, elected through universal franchise, also became the first communal hothouse. This led to the emergence of full throated communal politics in the North and in the South. The JYC had come and gone.

The sudden rise and the rapid fall of the JYC, says more about Tamil society than about the youthful idealism or naiveté of the JYC founders. The numerical size of the community was a factor in the sudden rise of influence of the JYC, and it was equally a factor in its demise. Most of the principal JYC leaders were great teachers and accomplished intellectuals. Even without electoral success, they were held in high esteem by the people, and even without becoming parliamentarians, they continued to be leaders of the people. We can only contrast the JYC experience with the more recent and tragic experience of the Tamil society involving a new generation of youth neither inspired by Gandhian ideals nor committed to universal values, non-violence, or democratic norms. ■

Courtesy Island

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