

DR. S.A. WICKREMASINGHE

REMINISCENCES OF A COLLEAGUE

Premalal Kumarasiri

In Sri Lanka, on the issue of paternity, whether of the nation or of Socialism, there seem to be some misconceptions. Paternity of this kind has been ascribed to persons quite subjectively and without any substantial basis. For instance, the individual designated as Father of the Nation was a person who resigned from the Ceylon National Congress when at its annual conference in 1945, it adopted a resolution demanding full independence (I was one of those who voted for the resolution) He issued a statement saying that he did not want to remain in an organization which demanded full independence for the country. Perhaps that was why he was honoured by the British Imperialists with the title Right Honourable. Then the individual designated as Father of Socialism was a person who after some years of undoubtedly courageous struggle against imperialism and capitalism deserted the movement (after splitting it twice) and for glaring opportunistic reasons joined the reactionary, capitalist, UNP Government.

In Sri Lanka there could not be a Father of Socialism because so far there has been no socialism in this country. There has only been a struggle for socialism as a result of which nationalist or peoples' government of varying degrees of progressive nature came into being. In this struggle for Socialism, many individuals have contributed in varying degrees of ardour, effort, heroism and sacrifice, some achieving martyrdom. But none qualified to be the 'Father.'

In my mind the person who came nearest to this designation was Dr. S.A. Wickremasinghe. He was the first to introduce socialist ideas into this country. He was the first socialist demanding socialist measures in the first legislature elected on universal franchise long before other Left leaders returned from abroad after their studies, he had started the fight for socialism.

While all others were asking for reforms Dr. Wickremasinghe was the first revolutionary anti-imperialist who demanded full independence and total emancipation from colonialism. He was such a persistent and relentless critic and opponent of imperialists and the local stooges, that the D.S. Senanayake-D.B. Jayatilleke caucus nicknamed him the Morawaka '*Etamessa*' (Cattle-biting gadfly). Though this was meant to insult him, it was rather apt because at the receiving end of his bites were a herd of bulls.

Dr. S.A. Wickremasinghe extended his anti-imperialist struggles to the field of Buddhist education too. In the early decades of the last century Buddhist education was an arena of struggle against imperialism and its concomitants. In competition with Christian missionary education Buddhist education activists fought against proselyzation and westernization and in defence of national culture.

For a number of years Dr. Wickremasinghe was the General Manager of the Buddhist Theosophical Society, the main tool of Buddhist education, serving the country in that capacity with distinction.

Doreen

His wife Doreen too was an active participant in the educational renaissance of Sri Lanka, in addition to being his devoted partner and comrade in politics. Doreen, an English woman, a graduate of the London School of Economics, came to Ceylon as the Principal of Sujatha Vidyalaya, Matara. She married Wicks and became the Principal of Ananda Balika Vidyalaya, Colombo. Doreen was a specialist in education. Through the Modern School she ran in the early forties, she introduced new, revolutionary methods of kindergarten and primary teaching. Doreen also became the first European woman to be elected to the Legislature of an Asian country, by winning the Akuressa seat in the Parliamentary General election in 1952.

Dr. S. A. Wickremasinghe was one of the founder leaders of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party formed in 1935 but when that party passed a resolution condemning the Third International formed by Lenin and criticizing the Soviet Union, the first Socialist State in the world for not starting revolutions in other countries, Wicks together with M.G. Mendis, Rev. Saranankara, A. Vaidialingam and others left that party. This was the beginning of the fight against Trotskyism, one of his major contributions to the revolutionary movement. Subsequently in 1943, Dr. Wicks formed the Communist Party loyal to Marxism-Leninism (of which I had the privilege of being a founder member) and led it consistently through victories and setbacks until his death in 1981.

Conspiracy Against S.A.

The reactionary clique led by D.S. Senanayake hated him so much that they got a special clause introduced into the Soulbury Constitution to plunder from him his civic rights, specially to prevent him coming into the legislature. Under their persuasion Lord Soulbury included in this constitution the infamous clause 13.3(f) which banned for seven years, entry into Parliament of a person sentenced to imprisonment for two years. Dr. Wicks had served such a sentence in 1942 for his anti-imperialist activities. So he could not contest the 1947 General Elections for Parliament. But contesting a bye-election for the State Council in 1947, he had won with a majority of 23,000 votes! The parallel to this crime is the plunder of Mrs. Bandaranaike's civic rights by J.R. Jayewardene in 1977.

S.A. and Irrigation

Much has been written about Dr. Wickremasinghe's exemplary and inspiring political life. I do not wish to repeat them. I like to touch upon some less known but equally interesting facets of his life. One such facet was his keen, almost obsessive interest in irrigation and connected problems. After all as a Sri Lankan he was heir to a quite scientific hydraulic civilization. He was born and bred on the banks of the Nilwala river – the river which together with Walawe river nurtured the heroes of Ruhuna.

To D.S. Senanayake, irrigation meant supplying water to paddy fields. To S.A. Wickremasinghe it meant something much more complex. It meant multi-purpose projects, a host of interconnected phenomena, that included: (a) reforestation to ensure a perennial supply of water (except in a severe drought to the streams and to arrest soil erosion thereby preventing the silting of rivers, (b) generation of hydro-electricity, a cheap source of power that could be made available not only to cities but also to the villages, (c) flood control in the river basins (d) navigation on the river and of course (e) irrigation of a vast acreage not only around the river but also far away from it.

To achieve these aims, the principle he upheld was that rivers must be dammed and tapped starting from the upper reaches. As brilliant examples of this principle he held onto the Tennessee Valley Scheme and various projects in the USSR. As a firm believer in this principle he criticized the Gal Oya Scheme at Inginiyagala (after the river has come within sight of the sea) and the Nilwala ganga scheme at Bandaltara (where the river has almost reached the sea). Learning this principle from Wicks, when I repeated it in Parliament one day, D.S. Senanayake got angry and shouted at me "It is your upper reaches that should be dammed" (*Thamusetta Isakudichchiyak Bandinna Oney*). In my reminiscences I might describe how Wicks took time off his very busy medical practice to tour some river basins to study the terrain and layout and to gather very down to earth information from the villages. He didn't want to bother his driver in these trips. I was his driver and companion. Subsisting on biscuits and chocolates (and plenty of oranges in the Dambagalla area) and sleeping inside the car, we spent days and nights in the villages and jungles of the Deduru Oya, Gal Oya and Walawe basins. Dr. Wickremasinghe's seminal book was 'The Way Ahead' (Idiri Maga)—a plan for the economic development of the island (agriculture, irrigation and industrialization).

People's Doctor

Another facet of his life that deserves mention was his application of Marxist principles, such as the concept of the universal connection of phenomena, in his medical practice specially in treating poor patients. One day he had a number of patients from the same village suffering from a skin rash. Next day he had some more patients from an adjoining village suffering from

the same disease. This continued on the third day too. After treating the patients he asked them "Where do you bathe?" "At the Bandathara ferry," they replied. (Bandathara is a popular bathing spot on the Nilwala river. Inhabitants from surrounding hamlets even from Matara town go there to bathe) "How do you clean your backs?" he asked. "We rub our backs on the Mara tree on the bank of the river," they said. He then sat down and wrote a letter to the MOH of the area. "Give this letter to the MOH, and until he does something, ask the people not to go near the Mara tree." In the letter to the MOH he had written that there was an epidemic of a skin disease in the villages surrounding the bathing place, that he suspects the source of the disease to be the Mara tree and asked the MOH to send his men to disinfect the tree. When the MOH and his men visited the area they found entire villages afflicted by the disease. Only a few who could afford had gone to Dr. Wicks. Anyway, they had disinfected the Mara tree and taken other necessary steps to curb the epidemic. And Dr. Wickremasinghe's fame spread once again.

In another incident, Mrs. Balasuriya, principal of Sujatha Vidyalyaya, Matara brought her sick child to him with a complaint of diarrhoea. He treated the child and the child was cured. A few days later Mrs. Balasuriya brought the child again with the same complaint, and the child responded to Wicks' treatment. This happened again a few days later. That day Wicks asked the mother to wait till he saw all the patients. Mrs. Balasuriya was intrigued. After finishing his work Wicks accompanied Mrs. Balasuriya to her home and went straight into the kitchen and started examining the utensils used in the process of feeding the child, and discovered that feeding bottles, milk jugs and other utensils were not properly washed or sterilized by the domestic aid at Mrs. Balasuriya's house. He gave instructions about what to do, and there were no more complaints.

In yet another incident, one day I was sitting down to lunch when a constituent of mine, Thepanis from Ududamana, came in. I invited him to sit down for lunch. With an aggrieved look he murmured some words and looked away. I asked him what the problem was. He told me that he had gone to Dr. Wickremasinghe for treatment of his palms (the skin of both palms had cracked and there was itching) and the doctor had given him a letter to be given to the Excise office to obtain a licence to tap a *kitul* tree for toddy. On two previous occasions for the same ailment he had been given injections. This time he was asked to tap a tree and drink toddy. That was Thepanis' grievance.

I abandoned my lunch and went with him to Dr's house saying, "Let us find out what it means. Dr. wouldn't do anything without a valid reason." He is a doctor with divine sight (*divya gnanaya*), people said. Wicks speaking to me said that Thepanis was suffering from an illness the name of which I now forget and that there was a fairly expensive injection as a cure for it. On two previous visits he had given him that injection free. "I am not rich enough to continue giving such an expensive injection free. And I can't charge him money because he is poor and more than that he is a party

member. I worked out what a close and cheap substitute for the injection would be and I hit upon toddy. So you advise him to do what I have suggested." I did so.

About a month later Thepanis came to my place with a spring to his feet and a song on his lips, carrying a pot of curd shouting (*vinodayai piliyamai dekama*) "Fun and cure both." I asked him what he was celebrating. He said that as advised by Dr. he had obtained a licence and tapped a *kitul* tree for toddy. He enjoyed drinking the toddy sometimes with friends. And now he was totally cured. Needless to say a few days later I visited his village to partake of this divine nectar myself.

Wicks treated many of his patients free. No charges for consultation or for medicines given from his dispensary, but he charged good money from rich people. His political opponents criticized him for being costly. Yes he was "costly" to landed proprietors, *mudalalis* (rich merchants), feudal gentry and other wealthy people.

In diagnosing illness, he not only did clinical examinations, but also "sociological surveys" of the patient, his income, profession, lifestyle and general background. His prescriptions both for medicines and for diet and supplementary tonics etc., depended on this examination and "survey." He did not have to do it with his regular patients whose background he knew. For diet and supplementary nourishment, instead of costly items he would prescribe cheaper substitutes, natural and readily available in the village. The above are the reasons why he became such a popular, much sought after physician, a "people's doctor," a real *Jeevaka* (one who gives life).

Fight Against Caste

A third aspect of his life I wish to touch upon is his fight against caste discrimination. According to the accepted view of caste hierarchy, *goigama* is the highest caste. He belonged to that caste and he belonged to a wealthy feudal family recognized and respected by society. But for the so-called "low" caste people, the depressed, deprived castes, he was a God loved and adored by them. For they knew that he did not believe in the caste system, that he was against caste discrimination and that in instances of caste domination and harassment they could go to him for succour.

Hittetiya was a suburb of Matara inhabited mainly by people of a so-called depressed caste. Hinni Appu from this locality was arrested by the police, taken to the police station and brutally beaten up. As a result he died in the police lock up. The matter would have ended there if not for Dr. Wickremasinghe. He came forward promptly on behalf of this helpless victim, demanding justice. He started a campaign of agitation against police brutality and initiated a legal process for justice and redress. Lawyers of the Matara Bar were reluctant to give him a helping hand because they did not want to antagonize the police and jeopardize their success at the bar. Only one lawyer, Mahanama Samaraweera, came forward to

help him in preparing affidavits and pushing the legal process. As a result of Dr. Wickremasinghe's efforts a Commission was appointed which held that the police was guilty and that an innocent man had been killed. The Commission recommended that the Attorney General should prosecute the guilty parties. This he did and some policemen were convicted. (This was in 1943).

Overnight Dr. Wicks became a people's hero, a fearless fighter for human rights and a champion of the underdog. His fame spread like wildfire. *Kavikola* (leaflets containing folk poems in praise of Wicks) appeared on the streets. Though this was more of a fight against violation of human rights by the police than against caste discrimination, yet among the "depressed" castes it was regarded as a historic battle in support of their rights. Inheriting this legacy, Wicks' daughter Suriya today, as the Secretary of the Civil Rights Movement, is campaigning for human rights in Sri Lanka.

One day in 1949 I was returning from my electorate, and before going home for lunch dropped in at Wicks' place at about 1 p.m. I saw three or four people under the bread fruit tree in the front garden. They had no upper garments and I knew they belonged to the *berawa* (drummer) caste, a so-called "low" caste who were not permitted to cover the upper part of their bodies even when they go to the town. From their demeanor I sensed that they were in trouble. As was the duty of the people's MP I walked up to them and inquired what the trouble was. They told me they were from Galagama, a village in Beliatta electorate bordering my own electorate. That morning a clash had broken out between their caste and the *goigama* people. A pitched battle had commenced and already some people may have been killed. So they came rushing to *Dostara Hamuduruwa* (Lord Doctor) to seek intervention and mediation.

I asked them to wait a minute and went inside to convey this to Wicks. He had just returned from a hard morning's work in the dispensary and was about to start his lunch. He listened to me, abandoned his lunch, got up from the table and asked me "Can you drive me to this place? I don't want to drag my driver away from his lunch." "I readily agreed though I was hungry myself. We got into the car with our visitors in the back seat and I drove as fast as I could. (It was a powerful car an Austin 16.) On the way our visitors told us what had happened. They were a community of *berawa* caste people living amidst *goigama* people. A small boy of their community had been ill with pneumonia, and when he recovered the physician had said he could now resume going to school, but he should not bathe for a few days more and should not get exposed to wind and cold. So on his first day back to school he wore a *mace baniyama* (a cotton vest). When he was passing through the *goigama* quarter, he was stopped, given a slap and a knock by some *goigama* persons, his vest was torn to shreds and was chased back to his home.

This was an atrocious act which could annoy even the most placid. On hearing this the *berawa* men were provoked, armed themselves

with sticks and knives and went to battle. "We cannot tolerate this kind of inhuman cruelty any longer." *Goigama* men too armed themselves and came forward to meet the challenge. A pitched battle had ensued with the two sides armed and taking position. After listening to this account, Wicks told me in English (not to be understood by our passengers) "Premalal when we reach the place you go to the *berawa* people and with all your ability persuade them to calm down and come to a peaceful settlement with the *goigama*. I will go among the *goigamas* and do the same. But all the time you are talking to them keep watching me. When you see me giving you a signal, e.g. transferring my coat from one shoulder to the other (he had the habit of carrying his coat without wearing it, hanging from a shoulder hooked by a finger), start moving towards our group together with your group. It won't be easy to persuade them to do so. But somehow you must do it."

Then after we had passed Walasgala off Dickwella, turning towards our companions in the car he said "Immediately before we reach the battle ground if there is a bend on the road tell us so that we can stop the car on this side of the bend." There was such a bend and they told us so before reaching it. He asked them to get down from the car and proceed on foot. After they did so and we resumed our journey, I asked Wicks what the big idea was. "Don't you see, this is psychology. If the *goigama* combatants see them in my car, it will ignite a fresh flare-up. 'So you went to Dr. Wickremasinghe' they will say 'And you have the audacity to travel with him in his car.'" We reached the combat area – an open ground with a few trees and bushes and no houses. The two castes were lined up on opposite corners in battle array, armed with sticks and knives. Fortunately there were no casualties yet, though they had engaged in a few skirmishes. As mapped out by Wicks, he went to the *goigama* side, I to the *berawa* side.

They knew who I was, and though seething with anger and in a fighting mood, received me with deference. I gave them a lecture on the sociology of caste. I told them caste was the inheritance from feudalism and feudal division of labour, that it will take some time for it to disappear with the development of capitalism and with the emergence of socialist ideas. It will take a good deal of liberal education and progress of civilization for caste discrimination to disappear. We of the left were engaged in the task of getting rid of this monster. "So you will have to be patient and bear with injustice for some more time." I said caste distinctions cannot be eliminated by legislation. It has to die a natural death through consciousness and experience. In the course of this little speech I could see they were responsive to my ideas.

Meanwhile Wicks, addressing the *goigama* crowd had, I learnt later, reprimanded them for harassing a convalescing child. "Are you so heartless as to harass a young boy recovering from pneumonia? What would have been your reaction if he had been one of your children?" Then he had gone on to tell them that as a medical doctor he did not recognize caste difference in treating patients or in treating people generally. He gave the same medicine to the same

illness whatever the caste of the patient. He used the same stethoscope and the same thermometer.

Then he quoted Buddha and Wasala Sutta. Buddha did not believe in caste. According to Buddha a person becomes a Brahmin (high caste) or a Wasalaya (low caste) not by birth but by his own deeds, he had said. He too had discussed the sociology of caste. Let us be civilized human beings; let us be real Buddhists, he had said finally. At the end of this discourse he had suggested "Come let us go and make up, and live in peace hereafter." They were not totally unresponsive to the suggestion but had said, "How can we go to them: They must come to us, then we will make up."

It was at this stage that Wicks transferred his coat from one shoulder to the other. Watching like a hawk, I noticed it and told my listeners "I am sure Dr. Wickremasinghe would have persuaded them to apologize to you and make up. Shall we go and see?" They were reluctant at first but after a little cajoling agreed. And we started moving towards the *goigama* crowd. On seeing our movements they too started moving towards us. And so we met half way. The two parties greeted each other in oriental fashion, smiled and looked relieved and happy. Wicks made a short speech exhorting them to live in peace as brothers.

At the end of this "ceremony" I tried a small stunt of my own. I said "Can I have a glass of water to drink please?" "Why should you drink water sir, we will get you some *thambili* (King coconut water)" one of the *berawa* people said. "No, No, you wait, we will get the *thambili*" the *goigama* people intervened, and there was a competitive rush to get us *thambili* water. Within a few minutes there were about 5 or 6 bunches of *thambili* before us. We were really thirsty (and hungry too) so Wicks and I drank *thambili* to our heart's content. It was as if the reconciliation was toasted with *thambili* water. Subsequently all reports indicated that there were no more clashes.

Wicks as a Speaker

Wicks was a long-winded speaker at public meetings. He would touch on a multitude of subjects, ranging as one critic said, "from Volga to Nilwala." His speeches were full of "meat," containing a mass of facts and cogent information on matters relevant to the life of the people and current political and social affairs. But the speeches were not couched in oratorical or eloquent phraseology or built up logically. I remember one incident where his son Suren was impatient with him. It was a public meeting in Badulla. Our itinerary included a sight seeing visit to Dunhinda Waterfalls because Suren had accompanied us on this trip. The meeting started at 9 a.m. and as Suren, who was about 10 years old at the time, was getting restless, he was taken away by one of the organizers of the meeting for ice cream. When he came back Daddy was still speaking. Anxious to get on the way to Dunhinda he was irritated. He turned to me and said "What is this Uncle Premalal, he could have just said America is no good and Russia

is very good and finished his speech and we could be on our way to see the river." Anyway, Suren summed up Wicks' speech in one beautiful sentence.

His Generosity

Dr. Wickremasinghe was a very generous person. His home in Matara was a veritable guesthouse. He helped party members and supporters in need. He bought the land for the party headquarters in Borella with his money. He maintained full-time party workers, especially in the Matara district. He had very little unearned income, so he was compelled to continue his medical practice to earn money. He could not come out as a full-time

political activist but he devoted a considerable amount of time daily in political work, breaking rest, doing his travelling in the night.

Dr. Wickremasinghe was a great noble man. But he too had human frailties. Sometimes he made mistakes. During the Sino-Soviet controversy and in the struggle against revisionism of Kruschev, he failed to continuously follow the line which, in my opinion, was correct. In the early stages he was in favour of the Chinese party line, but later fell back to support the Soviet line which, as everyone knows, ended up in the collapse of the Soviet Union causing a serious setback to the cause of Communism. I had differences and disagreements with him especially on this last issue. But I loved and respected him as a great leader dedicated to the noble cause of liberating mankind from exploitation and oppression. ■

Premalal Kumarasiri, Communist M.P. for Hakmana in the first Parliament 1947-52, was a Polit Bureau member and founder member of the Ceylon Communist Party

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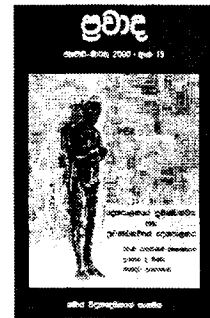
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