

Sri Lanka: The future of samasamajism

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For a start I divide the history of Samasamajism, the story of the Samasamaja movement as whole, not just the Party, into four periods centred on the last century. We are entering a fifth Period which will encompass Samasamajism's Twenty-first Century.

The two Phases of the first or Classical Period

The first Phase of the "classical period" is associated with NM's name, though it actually goes back to Phillip's participation in the Spanish Civil War. The Classical Period was imbued with a revolutionary ideology and ended in 1964 with the decision to enter a populist-capitalist Coalition government with Sirima. In a second Phase of the Classical Period the LSSP maintained the theory that the "Coalition Tactic" was still a way to socialism under the new global balance of power rising from Cuban, Algerian and Vietnamese revolutionary victories. A socialist state was still the objective. The international theoretician of this view was Michael Pablo, a Greek Marxist, and its leading domestic advocate was Hector Abhaywardhana. This second Phase ended in the mid-1970s when the coalition collapsed and the LSSP and CP were thrown out of the government.

The parliamentary Phase or Second Period

Arguably the Phase when the LSSP persisted with purely parliamentary politics was distinct from the Classical Period though some argue that NM was always a quintessential social-democrat. That point need not detain us here since I will return to it later. The parliamentary phase persisted till the end of the Twentieth Century and much overlapped the next Period. I am aware that this periodisation creates problems as will become clear as I proceed. In the late 1970s coincident with NM's death a Third Period distinct from the two previous Periods commenced.

In the minds of the Revolutionaries who I will discuss anon there was theoretical leapfrogging linking together many histories. From the Suriyamal campaign of 1931 to the launching of the Party in the mid-1930s, the war time and post-war anti-imperialist campaign, affiliation with Trotskyism, BLPI experiences in India, the return to prison in Ceylon and the fight for independence there was a Classical continuum in the minds of the Revolutionaries. Trade unionism and working-class organisations were consolidated at this time.

The rejection of racism, opposition to the Citizenship Laws that disenfranchised Tamil plantation workers and the rejection of Sinhala Only was in the minds of the Revolutionaries a thread linking to a classical past. The Revolutionaries who came into prominence in the 1970s and 1980s joined these many threads into a dialectical continuum and saw their mission as renewing the Classical roots contained in these variegated histories. I am inclined to call the 1970s and 1980s a Third Period conjoined in the minds of the Revolutionaries with classical Samasamajism.

The Third Period so defined

This Third Period is associated with many changes, conflicts and novel trends. Most significant is the rise of Revolutionary currents. The first event was the breakaway of Bala Tampoe's left-sectarian

trade unions in 1964, in the following years some ultra-Trotskyite groups came into being and soon melted away. The most important feature of the third period was the emergence of revolutionary entities linked with the names of Vickremabahu (Bahu), Siritunga, Vasudeva, Lal Wijeneyake and Prof Kumar (VK). The perspective of all these entities was internal struggle (abyanthara aragalaya). There were strategic and tactical differences among us but we all agreed on one fundamental point: the natural home of the advanced working class was Samasamajism and it was wrong to break with it. The task therefore was to “capture” the Party by internal struggle, not to split it. In the minds of the Revolutionaries there was an organic link between Classical Samasamajism and their own outlook. Otherwise what’s the meaning of fighting to “rescue” Samasamajism? The Revolutionaries saw the Classical Period and their own tasks (abiyantha aragalaya) as symbiotically linked. These ambiguities make a formal (undialectical) periodisation of Samasamajism difficult.

The Period as so defined coincided with an alliance with the Militant Movement in the British Labour Party (led by Ted Grant) which had independently of us arrived at the same conclusion; the primacy of the internal struggle.

The fourth period

Unfortunately, things worked out differently. The Old Guard Party Leadership was determined not to hold a democratic conference and expelled the revolutionaries one by one. The revolutionary trends disintegrated and after NM’s death the party was taken over by apparatchiks. Samasamajism became intellectually gloomy and functionally routinised. This phase of dullness is associated with Batty Weerakoon and Tissa Vittrana but it became more obvious after the civil-war ended and the LSSP capitulated to Cabinet posts and bowed down to Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Quite separate from Samasamajism something else was happening in Lanka; the rise of the JVP and Wijeweera. This was rooted in the experiences of the USSR and via Sanmugathsan in Chinese Communism. Samasamajism was deeply (and uniquely in the world for a party in government) rooted in Trotskyism. Suddenly a bigger world had arrived at our doorstep. As the LSSP was drifting to a parliamentary strategy, the ultraleft adventurism of the JVP captured the imagination of the country’s young generation. The JVP’s immature adventurism resulted in two massive defeats where hundreds in 1971 and tens of thousands in 1989-91 were massacred by the military and the police.

NM’s unexpected relevance

There is however a more serious concern relating to right-wing Sinhala-Buddhist (SB) populism that has surfaced. The National People’s Power (NPP-JVP) group is much criticised for not publishing its economic development programme and recently people have been critical of its programmatic blindness on the national question. A dangerous focus is when SB ideologues say: “If the JVP makes concessions to Tamils and Muslims such as devolution or land rights it will face a backlash in its own SB backyard. Its base will turn away”. The argument is credible and the response of the minorities is foreseeable. They will vote for their own communal parties at home, and outside their areas of domicile they will vote for the right wing. The bane of this nation, the racial divide between SBs and the Tamils-Muslims, will be aggravated. And this time it will be on the watch of the Left if the JVP is in government or wins the presidency!

Ajith Samaranayake in one of his more inspired essays called NM “The best Prime Minister that Sri Lanka never had”. Looking back over the last 80 years this is perhaps far truer than Ajith foresaw. Had NM been PM/President (head of state) he would never have stood by and permitted the carnage that JR permitted (nay provoked and encouraged), SWRD invoked in 1959 and Mrs B allowed on the plantations.

“The Role of the Individual in History” is the title of Plekhanov’s famous treatise, and indeed the role of leaders great and small can be decisive, Gandhi, Lee Kuan Yew, Mandela and Jacinda Arden for example. Rooting out the ethnic cancer would have changed the miserable history of this country. If NM had been Head of State, he would not have permitted race riots. Lee had the advantage of universally enforced English and eventually a much stronger economy. But the character of the head of state is also profoundly important. NM, if he was Head of State in 1958 or 1983, would have dispersed racist mobs, arsonists and rapists.

After its golden age of opposition to the infamous disenfranchisement of Tamil plantation workers and opposition to the Sinhala Only Act, the Samasamaja movement did make blunders. Oh yes that’s true. At the same time there’s no denying that Samasamajists are not racists; racism invokes revulsion in their innermost core.

Many are the racists who after a brief sojourn in Samasamajism went their way to terrain more agreeable to their mindset. The challenge today is whether the “revolutionary-socialist and Marxist” JVP measures up to the standards of international socialism? Will it stand against an SB wave or will it capitulate? And if it yields to racism how will it explain itself to international socialism?

There is a point about NM that is relevant to any discourse on Lanka now. NM was a quintessential social-democrat in the best traditions of the Enlightenment; but he was also a Marxist. This is the fine line that the JVP will have to tread in the domestic and global circumstances of these times. Sans social-democracy and commitment to change of government by democratic elections, millions will turn away. At the same time the nation’s youth expect radical system transforming leadership from the JVP. It’s a tough call.

Can the comrades measure up to the twin challenge? I think so; NM would have, had he been Head of State. It is no secret that though he dragged us kicking and screaming into coalition with Sirima, by 1975 he was disillusioned and wanted to quit the government despite the opposition of the “golden brains” (Hector, Doric, Bernard, Colvin and Leslie) and he best saw the coming electoral slaughter of the Left in 1977. He was opposed to the Chapter on Buddhism in the Republican Constitution and told a closed party group meeting in Peradeniya in 1975 “I don’t know how Colvin works with that woman”.

The next phase

The challenge now is to regroup the widely scattered Samasamaja fragments into one tradition. Let me call it Twenty-first Century Samasamajism. How should the traditions of the movement be re-shaped for the new century? Of course, no one imagines that the clock can be turned back and a single party re-formed. No, of course not. Rather I am advocating a broad consensus umbrella under which a comradesly free flowing association can flower. The leaders of the LSSP are well situated to initiate it, but are they listening? The NPP is a coalition of some 28 organisations and some in the future Samasamaja consensus can belong to the NPP as well.

Globally there is a right-wing populist backlash. Viktor Oban (Hungary) was in power even before Trump and since then we have had Marine Le Pen rise to prominence in France, Erdogan sweep back to power in Turkey and leftist president Gabriel Boric loose a referendum in Chile. India’s Modi is a Hindutva communalist. The good news is Lula in Brazil. It is a complicated international scene and new Samasamajism will have to think how to relate to the new international situation as well.

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