

A Life of devotion to the people's Cause

(Pieter Keuneiman on the occasion of the 75th Birth Anniversary of Dr.S.A.Wickremasinghe)

Pieter Keuneman

I was still at school when I first heard of Dr.S.A.Wickramasinghe. He had been elected to the first State Council in 1931, being the First Socialist to break the monopoly that the ruling classes had enjoyed in the legislature until then.

Dr.Wickremasinghe's speeches in the State council were reported in the newspapers which always also carried several articles by him.

His fearless criticism of the imperialist rulers, his exposure of the colonial bureaucracy and their local supporters, his repeated appeals to the workers and the youth to form their own organizations, accepts scientific socialist principles and join the struggles for national liberation and social progress, interested and inspired me greatly. I was also inspired by the Suriya Mal campaign, of which he was a prominent leader.

As far as I remember, however, the first time I saw Dr.S.A.Wickremasinghe in person was in 1935, shortly before I left for Great Britain to follow higher studies. This was, I believe, at the inaugural meeting in Colombo where the Lanka Sama Samaja Party was found. This was the first attempt in Sri Lanka to form a party with the twin aims of National independence and Socialism.

The first time I actually met Dr.Wickremasinghe was, however, in Great Britain at Cambridge University. Two other Sri Lankan students namely, the late P.Kandiah and A.Vaidialingam and I had joined the Communist party in Britain and had discussed among ourselves the need to form a communist Party on the Lenin model in Sri Lanka too, when we returned home. We decided to invite Dr.Wickremasinghe, who was then representing the L.S.S.P on London, to be the chief speaker at a dinner given by Sri Lanka students at Cambridge University.

I was very moved and impressed by Dr.Wickremasinghe's speech on that occasion. I was even more impressed by the talk we had after the dinner was over. Kandiah, Vaidialingam and I agreed that Dr.Wickremasinghe would be the person with whom we should all work when we returned home.

It is interesting to know that all four of us were to be founder members of the United Socialist Party in 1941 and of its successor the Communist Party, in 1943. All four of us have served together in the Central Committee of our Party and in its Political Bureau.

I first began to work actively with Dr.Wickremasinghe in 1940 when I returned to Sir Lanka after completing my studies. At that time he had just been expelled from the L.S.S.P. after defending the policies of the Communist party of the Soviet Union and the Third (Communist) international. He was also awaiting trial by the British Colonial Government for his anti-imperialist activities.

Dr.Wickremasinghe was the key figure around whom both the comrades who had been expelled form the L.S.S.P along with him and the Communist students who returned from abroad rallied in order to start the contemporary communist movement in Sir Lanka.

My political personal association with comrade Wickramasinghe over the past 35 years has been so close and so full of incidents, that it would require several volumes to describe even a small portion of it. I shall not attempt here to assess the contribution he has made to political development in Sir Lanka and the work of our party and to the forward march of the working people. All this has been very well summarized in the special resolution adopted by the Central Committee of our party on the occasion of Dr.Wickremasinghe's 75th Birthday and there is no need to repeat it.

But, as I write, incidents come vividly to my mind which give life and humanity to the scientific assessments made in the resolution. I remember the tremendous courage with which he faced not only the political attacks of British imperialism and its local supporters in the early days, but also the terrorist physical attacks launched against us. In particular, I recall a meeting at Gall Face in the early 1940's where hired thugs attacked us with knives and bottles and how we continued the meeting, defending ourselves and trying to make our speeches at the same time. It was one of the ironies of fate that the person who had jumped on the platform and tried to stab Dr.Wickremasinghe was so impressed at his courage that he not only desisted from doing so, but evan joined our Party later.

I was in court with Dr.Wickremasinghe on the two occasions when he was sentenced to imprisonment for his anti-imperialist activity. I recall how he conducted him self. Now that one of the judges who sentenced him is dead. I

may mention that he confided to me long afterwards that, even though he sentenced Dr. Wickremasinghe, he was not sure whether it was Wickramasinghe or those who prosecuted him who were really on trial!

I remember the very close and direct rapport that has always existed between Dr. Wickremasinghe and the common people, especially with the peasantry and the agricultural workers of Ruhuna. They always listen to him, and he to them, with great care and affection, as members of the same family. Dr. Wickremasinghe is at his best at village meetings where peasants listen with obvious respect to his detailed knowledge about their problems and to his proposals about how they can be solved.

How ever it is not only working people and rural folk who have been impressed by Dr. Wickremasinghe's knowledge. The scientific and technical intelligentsia of our country has always been impressed with his contributions on a vast variety of subjects, such as state of the economy, problems of industrialization, a variety of problems concerning agriculture, irrigation, soil conservation and land reform, as well as in the sphere of national and scientific education. Dr. Wickremasinghe's contributions on these matters have often helped decisively to fashion progressive national policies in regard to them. Many who originally scoffed at his proposals and warnings were latter to pay tribute to the timeliness and appropriateness of what he had to say.

Dr. Wickremasinghe's medical skill is in no way inferior to his political ability. In fact, he has always been able to combine both in the service of the people. The outstanding role he played in the days of the Malaria epidemic is but one example of this. I have on numerous occasions, while campaigning with him in remote areas of the country in the early days seen how, after a meeting had closed, he had attended to the medical needs of people in remote villages where medical facilities were then not available sometimes even commandeering me to act as an untrained assistant and even, on one occasion, as an assistant mid-wife ! I also remember how, during his sojourn in the Welikada jail, he carried out his own investigation in to the nutritional qualities of the food supplied to the prisoners by testing it out on pigeons. His findings, which were later made public, caused a scandal and an improvement in the diet given to prisoners. And of course, speaking personally, I can never forget how Dr. Wickremasinghe's medical skill saved my life in a period when our Party was illegal.

To Dr.Wickremasinghe goes the credit of being the first to introduce to Sir Lanka the idea of scientific communism, the teachings of Marx and Engle's. He was a pioneer in explaining to the working people of Sir Lanka the great successes of socialist construction in the USSR and the need for close and friendly relations between the peoples of Sir Lanka and those of the USSR and other socialist countries.

Throughout his life Dr.Wickremasinghe has combined a deep patriotism internationalism.

He has fought consistently for national unity and brotherhood between the different nationalities of Sir Lanka. He has defended science against various forms of obscurantism and sometimes fallen into trouble for doing so.

I recall that once, in the first State Council, the late Sir D.B.Jayatilake (who was so annoyed at the constant attacks of the young Wickramasinhge on his policies of collaboration with imperialism that he nick named him the "MorawakaAtamassa") told Dr.Wickremasinghe that if he did not respect any thing else about him he should at least respect his age. Dr.Wickremasinghe's reply was "Age alone is no proof of wisdom".

The then young Dr.Wickremasinghe is now 75 years old and still going strong' he is the only one of his generation that entered the political arena at the beginning of the 1930's who is still in active politics. With age, Dr.Wickremasinghe has accumulated not only wisdom and experience but also even deeper revolutionary conviction. His whole life has been devoted to the people's cause.

On the happy occasion of his 75th birthday, I think Dr.Wickremasinghe for his great contribution to our movement, I wish him good health, good fortune and many more years of devoted leadership to our people and Party.

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