

# His Militancy Had No Match

**THE LIFE & WORK OF UPALI COORAY**



**Edited & Published By Wilfred Silva**

**CELEBRATING THE REVOLUTIONARY  
MARXIST & HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER**



**I**t is important to remember that nowhere in the world have the poor, the oppressed and the exploited ever won anything by begging, pleading and imploring the ruling elite to do the right thing. It is futile to ask the ruling class to serve the people, plead that they behave like gentlemen or appeal to their good sense. Those who advocate that we must appeal to the good sense of the ruling elite in order to protect the rights of the oppressed or the minorities are like good old village priests who preach morality to brothel keepers and implore that they give up their sinful habits and lead godly lives..

The poor, the oppressed and the minorities can win their rights only if they are able to build a strong and a united movement that can challenge the bankrupt politicians of yester years. We need not be intimidated or bedazzled by the power of the ruling elite. Even the most powerful men and governments on earth have been brought to their knees by the united action of the people. It is the disunity of the poor and the oppressed that creates the impression that the ruling elite is invincible. Time and again history has shown that the seemingly invincible and powerful rulers can be defeated when the people unite..

 **Comrade Upali Cooray**



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Militancy  
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No  
Match**

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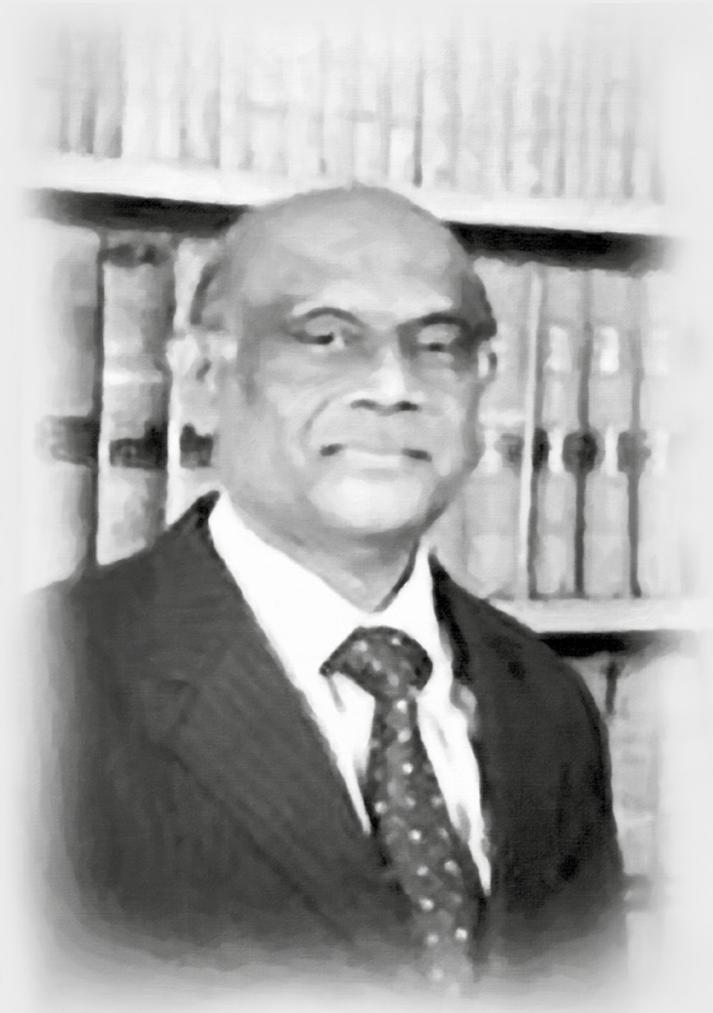
# Remembering **Upali Cooray**

This book is published  
for the 10<sup>th</sup> Memorial event

held at

**Northolt Village Community Centre**  
Ealing Road, Northolt UB5 6 AD, U.K.

**On 8<sup>th</sup> September 2019**



■ Comrade UPALI COORAY



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■ The ideas, opinions and conclusions expressed in this book are those of the authors only.

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■ Published by **Wilfred Silva**

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## Acknowledgement

This book is a collection of the selected articles and a speech by Comrade Upali Cooray in the final years (From 2007 to 2009) of his life and statements published by his friends and comrades remembering and celebrating Upalis' life and work.

I would like to thank Comrades - Tamba, Soori, Kumar, Redley, Tilak and Dhammika- those with whom I have worked over the past few weeks to organise this event and to get printing this booklet in a sort period of time.

**Wilfred Silva**

August 2019

# Table of Contents

<b>FOREWORD</b> .....	7
By Wilfred Silva	
<b>MEETING COMRADE BARISTER AT JANAHANDA</b> .....	21
By Kapila Kumara Kalinga	
<b>UPALI COORAY: THE UNREPENTANT MARXIST</b> .....	25
Speech By Comrade P. Rajanayagam	
<b>PEACE IN SRI LANKA AND BASIS FOR PEACE</b> .....	31
Speech By Comrade Upali Cooray	
<b>WHAT IS TO BE DONE</b> .....	41
By Comrade Upali Cooray	
<b>REBUILDING THE LEFT MOVEMENT IN SRI LANKA</b> .....	51
By Comrade Upali Cooray	
<b>THE TRUMPHALISM AND JINGOISM</b> .....	59
By Comrade Upali Cooray	
<b>WE NEED A NEW MOVEMENT</b> .....	63
By Comrade Upali Cooray	
<b>WHO PROMOTED SEPARATISM IN SRI LANKA</b> .....	81
By Comrade Upali Cooray	
<b>A TRIBUTE FROM CANADIANS FOR PEACE</b> .....	87
By Comrade Ratnam Ganesh	
<b>A TRIBUTE TO COMRADE UPALI COORAY</b> .....	91
By Comrade Ervin Charled Wesley	
<b>REMEMBERING UPALI COORAY:</b> .....	95
From what might have Been ... To the hell we are in By Comrade Rajan Philips	
<b>A TRIBUTE TO COMRADE UPALI COORAY</b> .....	101
By Comrade Lionel Bopage	
<b>HIS MILITANCY HAD NO MATCH</b> .....	104
(Upali Cooray 17 September 1939 - 21 August 2009) By Engr. M. Sooriasegaram	
<b>UPALI COORAY: SRI LANKA SOLIDARITY ACTIVISM</b> .....	111
By Comrade B. Skanthakumar	

# FOREWORD

*By Wilfred Silva*

## **A Tribute to Comrade Upali Cooray (1939-2009)**

Comrade Upali Cooray was born in Moratuwa, Sri Lanka on 17th September 1939. He received primary education at a PIRIVENA and the Prince of Wales collage in Moratuwa. Thereafter, whilst studying at Aquinas College he was also actively involved in left politics. As a consequence, he was dismissed from the college by Fr. Tissa Balasuriya, the principal of the college at the time.

Whilst being a student, Upali joined the Youth League of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). ***“Upali cut his political teeth in the Sama Samaja movement, beginning as a member of the youth league, and later playing leading roles in political and trade union struggles”*** said Comrade Rajanayagam.

During 1958/59, he taught at Karandeniya Central School in Galle, where, he fought against caste-based discriminatory practices by teachers in the school. In 1956 /1960 period he fought hard

against the anti-Tamil policies fostered by the MEP (Mahajana Eksath Peramuna) coalition government in Sri Lanka.

In 1964, when the LSSP by majority vote joined a coalition government led by the SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party), Upali supported the revolutionary Trotskyist faction of the LSSP, led by Edmond Samarakkody, Bala Tampoe, V. Karalasingham and Meryl Fernando which broke away from the LSSP and formed the LSSP (Revolutionary) Party. Upali was elected to the Central Committee of the LSSP(R) and left for Britain to pursue higher studies.

In Britain, Upali joined the International Marxist Group (IMG), the British section of the Fourth International. He became the Secretary of Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and also worked with the Southall Solidarity Movement against white racism in London. On several occasions he was physically attacked by white racists. Comrade Soori has wrote as follows in his writing on *“My recollections on Upali Cooray”*

***“We gradually shifted our emphasis to antiracist work in Britain. This turned out to be an equally formidable task. We were exposing racism within the police, within the Tory party, Labour party and generally within all the British Establishments. Syd Bidwell, Labour MP for Southall was a racist and the Labour party office was burnt down by the Asian youth.*”**

***When Kuldeep Chagar was murdered in 1976, by white racists in Southall, we were the first to go to the scene to find his body hanging over a railing bleeding all over. We covered his body in red cloth and called***

***the ambulance. The police was complicit. They never rush to such crime scenes. They only come when the murder is accomplished in safety. This was the pattern in England then. We held a meeting very near the spot in a car park on the same day. A lot of Asian youth gathered there. Upali got on top of a parked car and used it as a platform and made a brilliant, emotive and rousing speech around which the Asian youth were mobilised. He made a very calculated political speech. He convinced the youth that enough is enough and it is time to fight back. It is this political courage that I admire most in Upali. He is of course a powerful speaker.***

***We were the first in Britain to coin the slogan “Self defence is no offence”, which sent shivers throughout the police and the government circles. It actually meant that we form our own community police and task force to defend ourselves, challenging the monopoly of the state police. Although it was only a slogan the establishment became very concerned of this precedence and increased surveillance against us. All our names were in the Police register.***

***We did a lot of work in Southall during this period among the Indian community. The conservative Indian Workers Congress also did not like our revolutionary stand. But the Indian youth flocked around us then.***

***Later Brixton riots took place. Tottenham riots took place. These shook the establishment, leading to commissions of inquiries. Racism became the most talked about subject. We challenged the National***

***Front through our Bulletin and at public meetings. IMG and SWP were behind us all the time. We held meetings all over the country especially at NUS conferences and at Labour Party fringe meetings.”***

In 1971, in the aftermath of the failed youth rebellion led by the JVP in April that year in Sri Lanka, Upali worked together with comrades of the Ginipupura Group in London and campaigned for the release of 18,000 political prisoners held in detention centres. Also, he went on an international tour including Australia, Japan and Canada campaigning for their release.

Upali wrote about this campaign as follows:

***“We did not campaign for their release because we agreed with the political programme or the strategy of the JVP. We did so because we firmly believe that every person, regardless of their political opinions and actions are entitled to human and fundamental rights. Ironically, the JVP itself had repeatedly demonstrated that they themselves are not prepared to respect the human rights of others. In fact JVP is not the only culprit in this regard. Be that as it may, that is their problem and not ours. Our commitment to human and democratic rights is not based on their own actions and conduct but on our belief that if we do not stand up for human rights of every single individual, regardless of what they say or do, we will soon revert to a life of savagery and barbarity.”***

In 1972, he came to Sri Lanka to see his mother who was very ill. He was arrested at the Katunayake Air-port and taken to CID headquarters for questioning on his involvement in the campaign

for the release of political prisoners. In the meantime, his mother had passed away.

Again in 1975 Upali came back to Sri Lanka and worked with the Ceylon Mercantile Union and Revolutionary Marxist Party (Sri Lankan section of the Fourth International). He was in Sri Lanka until mid 1985 and worked as a political, human rights and Trade Union activist.

At the 1977 General Election he was a candidate of the RMP for the Dehiwala electorate and he was a fiery speaker against the Open Economic Policies presented by J. R. Jayawardena and the UNP. And, perhaps, for the first time on a Sri Lankan election platform Upali articulated women's rights.

After coming to power, the UNP government unleashed anti-Trade Union policies, violent attacks against the Trade Union movement and anti-Tamil pogroms. Upali worked hard against the policies and the violence of UNP government and the 1978 Constitution which brought in a Presidential system of governance. He organized CMU and RMP comrades to fight against the UNP thugs that attacked workers on strike.

As a leading member of the Revolutionary Marxist Party Upali immersed himself in the activities of building a revolutionary party and worked closely with leading activists of the Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU). He inspired younger comrades and dedicated his time to educating and encouraging them to play a leading role in the decision making bodies of the party. Within five years, from 1975 to 1980, he managed to double the RMP membership by recruiting trade union activists and building them as working class activists. Hence, the RMP and the CMU were able to play a major role within the working class and the trade

union movement against repressive policies and the thuggery of the UNP regimes led by J.R. Jayawardana and Ranasinghe Premadasa.

When the 1980 July General strike under the leadership of the Joint Trade Union Action Committee broke out, the CMU backpeddled and decided not to participate in the general strike. Bala Tampoe as General Secretary of the CMU with the support of his colleagues within the Executive Committee of the CMU took this decision in opposition to the majority view of the RMP. This provoked a political conflict within the party membership. Comrade Upali and the majority of RMP fought against the decision of the CMU leadership led by Bala Tampoe within the party. A special party conference was called to debate and take a political stand on this issue in early 1981. Comrade Tariq Ali of the IMG also participated in this conference as an observer. After long debate, Bala Tampoe and his minority group were defeated at the party conference and Bala Tampoe could not stand with the majority decision. Within a few weeks after the conference, Bala and his minority group left the party and they started expelling party members from their positions within CMU.

Upali had the courage to withstand this political witch hunt within the CMU and with the denial of access to the party office within the CMU building to the majority group of the RMP, he was able to keep the party members together. Eventually the party office was relocated within the premises of one of the comrades and political activities recommenced with renewed energy. Upali sold his car to print the party newspaper, Idirimaga. Some of party comrades had lost their jobs due to participating in the 1980 General Strike and some others had lost their jobs within the CMU due to Bala Tampoe's witch hunt. Upali managed and helped these comrades to keep them politically active in a demoralized situation with the

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defeat of the General Strike.

### **Upali's Activities after 1981**

In 1981 Comrade Upali initiated a Resource Centre for Community Groups. Its objectives were:

- (a) to help comrades who have been victimised by the 1980 General strike and
- (b) to help community organisations with their printing and other services because they could not afford the rates charged by commercial printers;
- (c) to provide skills training to youth and women from poor and disadvantaged families.

It is also important to remind ourselves that Upali and other comrades had a very strong commitment to the interests of the working class; their demands and concerns. So, the purpose of the RCCG was to find new recruits and contacts to build the left political movement. Therefore the work of the RCCG was an adjunct to RMP's political work and a means to promote its politics. At this time Upali had little money. He used to work as the legal representative of the CMU at the Labour Tribunal. But, after his split with Bala Tampoe he did not have an income.

It is important to emphasise that from those early days, the fund raising for the RCCG was carried out exclusively by Comrade Upali. For instance he would appear at the Labour Tribunal on behalf of workers and when they paid him or gave a contribution, he would not take it for his personal use, instead, gave it to the party or the RCCG.

Through his contacts in England and Europe, Upali was able

to raise small but steady amounts of money for the RCCG. Its next step was to buy an old second hand Otley letterpress, which Comrade T.N. Perera kindly agreed to install in the ram shackled building at the back of his house. It was the beginning of the CRC (Community Resource Centre) Press.

The setting up of the letter press enabled RCCG to expand its activities:

- CRC press did a lot of printing work for Community groups at discounted rates.
- RCCG could also provide training for youth from poor families.
  - ▶ RCCG made a revolutionary break with other organisations when RCCG decided to adopt a policy of positive discrimination in favour of women and to train women in printing.
  - ▶ One of the most essential aspects of RCCG was its commitment, at the very outset, to adopt a process of collective decision making.

Comrade Upali continued to provide real financial help to all the initiatives of the RCCG. For instance when Multicultural Education and Recreation Centre (MERC -Pussellawa) did not have money to buy a property to continue its work, Upali agreed to buy a piece of land which he had not even seen, because that was the only way the MERC could buy the land it required. At that time he did not have much money and all the comrades were living on a very low income. But Upali agreed to use almost all the money he had saved to help the MERC.

RCCG provided help to community organisations to print their material and sometimes RCCG took real risks to do so. Comrades TN, Wije, Balangoda Somapala, and Upali were even arrested because of their commitment to their aims and objectives. **Comrade Lionel who was an advice worker at Legal Advice Centre in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone was abducted and killed because of his commitment to these ideals.**

RCCG unequivocally supported the struggles of workers, women and ethnic minorities. For instance in 1981 RCCG distributed assistance to plantation workers who were attacked by UNP thugs and RCCG made a film depicting such attacks.

In 1983 RCCG campaigned against the anti-Tamil pogrom and organised clandestine leaflet campaign against the JR government

In Katunayake under the leadership of comrades Lionel and others, RCCG helped workers who went on strike and those who were dismissed.

The other important point that we should remember is that although RCCG began with a small composing unit, soon RCCG was able to expand its work.

Upali also initiated:

- ▶ A Legal Advice Centre in Katunayake,
- ▶ Ja-ela Workers' Centre in Ekala, Ja-Ela,
- ▶ MERC initially in Balangoda and then in Pussellava ,
- ▶ Nirmani Womens' Unit and news paper,
- ▶ Education Publications Unit

- ▶ Lankanet as First E-mail Service in Sri Lanka and ICT support for Community Organisations.

Comrade Upali played an instrumental role in initiating joint discussions and activities with other leftist groups and individuals with a view to regrouping and rebuilding the revolutionary left in Sri Lanka. About 10 years ago, Upali wrote and distributed a discussion paper called "REBUILDING THE LEFT MOVEMENT IN SRI LANKA". In that paper, he wrote:

***"In this paper I would argue that, today, more than ever, there is an urgent need to rebuild the left movement in Sri Lanka. Although 60 years have elapsed since the British colonial rulers transferred political power to the Sri Lankan elite, certain developmental goals that the left movement addressed itself to in early 40's still remain unfulfilled..."***

***...It is therefore important for the comrades of the LSSP, CP and other political groups which at various times had split from the LSSP and the CP to initiate the task of rebuilding the left movement. In doing so we must attract comrades of progressive organisations in the Tamil national movement, and from the progressives in the Muslim community and the Up-country Tamil community."***

He actively defended the rights of the Tamil people and workers' rights when President Jayawardena's regime unleashed repressive laws such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and Emergency Rule to crush the Tamil liberation movement and the trade unions.

He made an immense contribution to building MIRJE as a broad-

based movement that campaigned for the rights and defended the political aspirations of the Tamil people. Upali was a co-author with Paul Caspersz and Rajan Philips of the first MIRJE publication, "Emergency 79". It was also the first publication to deal with the human rights violations in Jaffna that began in 1979 and have not let up since.

It was a similar brave and principled campaign by him and his colleagues in 1988-89 that helped Mahinda Rajapakse to present in foreign human rights forums the data on killings and disappearances during the Premadasa regime. Upali was the person who organized the delegation of 4 persons including European Union MPs and lawyers to visit in Sri Lanka from 27 October to 4 November 1990.

The mission was organized to compile a report on the violation of human rights in Sri Lanka and the disappearance of Sri Lankans. This was one of the activities of the organization called "The Disappeared in Sri Lanka" which was initiated by Upali and other comrades in London. Since returning from Sri Lanka in November 1991, Alex Smith and Christine Oddy had lobbied the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European Council of Ministers to condemn the human rights abuses in Sri Lanka and to refuse aid until there was an identifiable improvement on human rights. The European Parliament had unanimously approved the resolution. This contributed to stop killings and human rights violations by the Premadasa Regime in Sri Lanka.

He initiated alternative institutions to organise and educate women workers in the Katunayaka Free Trade Zone by setting up a Women's Centre, a Legal Advice Centre and assisted women activists in publishing Da Bindu and Nirmani to raise awareness of women's issues.

Upali was a male feminist. Rajan Philips in his statement said,

***“Upali was the first male feminist I came across and I can say that he was a role model to other men in shedding the convenient shackles of patriarchy and male chauvinism.”***

He set up a Centre as a meeting place for Tea plantation workers in Balangoda. In 1984 while comrade Upali was having a meeting with plantation workers at this Centre he was arrested by the Balangoda Police and was held in custody for 20 days under the PTA.

He initiated Janahanda and Venasa, Sinhala language newspapers to counter war mongering and anti-Tamil propaganda in the Sinhala capitalist media.

He also launched several projects under the Development Education Publications, Aid: Rhetoric and Reality by Teresa Hayter, Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire, Where There Is No Doctor by David Werner were translated into Sinhala.

Upali himself translated Lenin for Beginners, Food for Beginners by Writers and Readers and The Origin of the Family by Kathleen Gough to Sinhala. Under the Workers' Rights Publications, he also wrote a series of booklets titled Workers' Rights explaining legal jargon in simple language for the benefit of worker activists.

In the late 1985 comrade Upali returned to Britain and tirelessly campaigned against disappearances and assassinations during the reign of terror in Sri Lanka under Premadasa regime. He together with democratic and leftist Tamil / Sinhala individuals and colleagues founded Friends of the Disappeared and the Committee

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for Democracy and Justice in Sri Lanka to highlight human rights violations and disappearances in Sri Lanka in the international arena.

He strongly opposed both state-sponsored violence and that of the LTTE. In this spirit he was involved in a continuous dialogue with non-LTTE Tamil leftists and others in forums such as the Sri Lanka Democracy Forum to forge links and to find alternative strategies to fight for democracy, justice, equality and dignity for all the people within a united Sri Lanka.

With the escalation of the ethnic conflict, there was massive proliferation of human rights abuses including detention without trial, torture, extra-judicial executions and involuntary disappearances in Sri Lanka. It was during this period that Upali became one of the leading figures who set up many campaigning organisations in the UK .

In regards to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, Upali firmly rejected the strategy of war and violence and forcefully argued for a negotiated political settlement which recognised the legitimate rights of all nationalities. He denounced and campaigned against violations of human and democratic rights, political assassinations and other excesses for which successive Sri Lankan governments and the LTTE were responsible.

Later in England, he had taken not only to practicing law but also to teaching it and making an academic contribution. Upali was known for taking on racist police officers who were hard on immigrants.

In his final articles, Upali was demanding to rebuild a New Mass movement against the chauvinist fever following the military

defeat of the LTTE. He wrote as follows:

***“We must break decisively with those failed policies of the LTTE as well as those of the Sri Lankan ruling elite. Instead we must build a new and a bold movement that could unite all those who have been exploited, disadvantaged and marginalized. Like the Suriya Mal Movement and the LSSP, which spearheaded the fight against caste oppression and British imperialism in the 1930’s, today we need a new movement to spearhead the struggle for modernity and to drag our country from the economic and political quagmire that the failed prophets of the yester years have led us into.”***

Ten years ago, in September 2009, Comrade Rajan Philips wrote in a message remembering Comrade Upali,

***“And we have lost the one man whose rallying cry in the face of oppression and human rights violation was to organize and resist, gather more support and fight, and not to give up until the job is done. Even as we mourn his death, we cannot give up hope that we shall overcome, sooner than later. That would be the biggest political tribute we could ever pay to Upali Cooray.”***

■ **Wilfred Silva** - August 2019

# MEETING 'COMRADE BARRISTER' AT "JANAHANDA"

Text of the tribute by  
Kapila Kumara Kalinga, Journalist & Artist in Sinhala language,  
which was published in Sri Lanka on November 2009

English Translation

*By Redley Silva*

I joined the 'Janahanda' newspaper in 1984 as a result of an advertisement in a weekly newspaper calling for applications for sub-editors.

The interview was held at a house in Kirulapona. When I went there for the interview, there were several known persons sitting in the veranda. Gunasiri Silva from the 'Aththa' newspaper (now he's a film critique) and teacher and well-known writer, Regi Weeraman, were amongst them.

Gunasiri faced the interview before me. On his return, I approached Gunasiri and asked him about the 'nature of the interview'. Gunasiri who was more knowledgeable about the contemporary trends within Lankan politics said;

***"They are die-hard Samasamajists. They ask about things such as the minority nations' right of self-determination."***

Gunasiri's and my political roots were in the Communist Party. However, our position was all leftists in the world were equally comrades. Gune advised me how to answer the interviewers and left.

After two weeks or so, I came to work for the new Janahanda newspaper as one of its two sub-editors. Gunasiri had been rejected. The chief of the interview board, Jayasumana Dharmabandhu, (former chairman of Moratuwa Town Council and a well-known writer) was the editor of the newspaper.

Regi Weeraman had also been selected. He was well-versed in Buddhist Philosophy and Psychology. I felt that he was an unfitting wheel on this venture. However, he was assigned with translation work.

The newspaper office was located on the upstairs of a building near Bernard's & Co., in Kohuwala.

On the first day, we entered the premises after boiling milk. The milk taken out from a fridge took a long time to boil. The smoke that emanated from the improvised fire engulfed the office.

A person with a charismatic personality that came in a little bit late seeing the suffering that we were going through in boiling the milk cynically laughed and said;

***“What's this? This is a practice of ancient agricultural society.”*** He was Upali Cooray.

### **Upali was Janahanda's nucleus.**

I first got to know comrade Upali on that day. Janahanda existed for less than two years. Barrister Upali who lived in England came

to Sri Lanka from time to time. Every time he came, he associated himself with the newspaper, inquired about it and gave advice. He even provided funds.

By then, he had come a long way in the Lankan political field. So, he had a huge amount of experience. The outstanding charisma he possessed was not built on his body muscles and height alone. His wide-ranging knowledge on a variety of subjects, his oratorical skills, and his ability to take decisions, time management and his leadership qualities were the bedrock of his charismatic personality.

Upali always came to see us with a pile of news. He talked not only politics but also about literature, films, sports, agriculture and everything else. He brought newspapers, magazines, cassette tapes and books, and gifted them to us saying,

***“Write about these things.”***

He gave us advice on the newspaper critically but constructively. They were always useful. When I look back, I feel that the editorial board of Janahanda was not strong enough to bring the newspaper to the level he expected.

Once, Upali came, suddenly, from England and sent a message asking me to come to his place.

***“Do you know Vijaya Kumaratunga?”*** He asked.

***“Yes”***

***“Can you arrange an appointment for me to meet him tomorrow?”***

***“I’ll see”***

Vijaya Kumaratunga, then, was the leader of the Mahajana Party. We got an appointment at 6.30 am. Comrade Upali and I went

to Vijaya's house. As a result of visit, Vijaya went to Jaffna and India, and had meetings with the leaders of Tamil armed groups. Supporting co-existence amongst nations was one of the main ingredients of Upali's vision of life.

I kept away from joining Vijaya's Indian trip for various reasons. Upali found fault with me, thus;

***“Kapila, had you been on this journey, you'd have had the opportunity to be the first Sinhala journalist to meet the Tamil militants in India.”***

We also made a film with Upali. It was about the lives of plantation workers. The Sinhala script of the film, 'Tale from the Hills', was written by me. It was directed by Christie Shelton Fernando and the music was composed by Premasiri Khemadasa. Although Upali was not an artist his artistic taste on films was high. He showed the documentary film we made to foreign audiences at conferences and workshops, but he expressed his disappointment with its amateurish features.

I have fond memories of the time spent with T.N. Perera, Kumudini Rosa, Mahipala, Atupela, Bandula, Hemachandra, Priyani and Indrasena at Janahanda. **The giant shadow behind it was comrade barrister, Upali Cooray.**

Later on, I didn't meet him. Each and everyone's life had got separated at various junctions and they had gone on their separate ways. I heard that Upali also had changed some of his views.

However, as we live in a society where we waste our lives with 'comic' stars in a 'farcical' state and intellectuals of the calibre of Upali Cooray is rare a breed; the celebration of his memory in itself is an inspiration.

■ **Kapila Kumara Kalinga**  
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# Upali Cooray: **The Unrepentant Marxist**

**Text of the tribute by, P. Rajanayagam, Editor of 'Tamil Times', on behalf of Upali's friends and comrades at his funeral on 3 September 2009**

*By P Rajanayagam*

**W**e are gathered here today to remember, pay tribute and bid farewell to our friend, colleague and comrade, Upali Cooray, whose untimely death on 21st August 2009 has grieved us all.

Upali's professional qualifications included a BSc (Hons) in Economics (London), LLB Hons (London) and MA in Business Law at London Guildhall University.

Called to the Bar in 1974, Upali practised as a Barrister. Upali was also a Senior Lecturer in Law at London Metropolitan University and taught in many areas including Immigration Law and Comparative Labour Law.

As a committed human rights lawyer, Upali has worked tirelessly for the unrepresented in Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom. Upali's practice has included a large amount of cases in Immigration, Employment, Criminal, Housing and Family Law.

My association with Upali spans a period of over fifty years. Upali, by his natural inclinations and ideological persuasion was the classical version of “the Leftist” fighting for causes and defending cases that others would not touch.

Like many of us belonging to his generation, Upali cut his political teeth in the Sama Samaja movement, beginning as a youth leaguer, then being a member, and later playing leading roles in political and trade union struggles.

The 1960’s were traumatic times for the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), and for that matter the entire left and working class movement in Sri Lanka. When the majority of the leadership of the Party began to embrace the strategy of coalition politics, it was resisted and opposed by the Left Tendency within the Party to which Upali and I belonged. When the LSSP, at its historic two-day conference in June 1964, decided by majority vote to enter into coalition politics, those of the Left Tendency, which was at that time led by Edmund Samarakkody, Bala Tampo, Merryl Fernando and V. Karalasingham, broke away from the LSSP and founded the LSSP(R). Among others, Upali and I were also elected to the Central Committee of the new party.

There is no doubt that the decision of the LSSP and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CP) in 1964 to enter into coalition politics determined the fate and future of not only these parties, but also the entire left and working class politics in the country. These parties from the 1940s had been powerful bastions on the Left having substantial support with branches and youth leagues functioning throughout the length and breadth of the country. They had under their political leadership and control almost the entire working class movement. These parties had well acclaimed leaders with intellect and stature who were acknowledged as political giants

even by their opponents. Even at the worst of times, these parties between them were able to win 15 to 20 seats in parliament. However, today these parties have become a pale shadow of their long, powerful and glorious past having insignificant impact on the politics of the island nation. Would these parties have suffered this fate had they avoided the strategy of coalition politics and continued to remain as champions of the Left fighting the cause of the oppressed and marginalised is a question that is worth pondering.

Upali was one of the founding members of the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) in July, 1979 of which Fr Paul Caspersz was the President. It was founded in the context of rising violence particularly in Jaffna where the military had been deployed, Emergency rule had been imposed and the draconian provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act had been invoked leading to widespread and gross human rights violations.

**Upali “was one of the moving spirits in MIRJE and a key organizer of many of its activities. He was a co-author with Paul Caspersz and me of the first MIRJE publication, “Emergency’79”, the first publication to deal with the human rights violations in Jaffna that began in 1979.” [Rajan Philips]**

Another report in the form of a booklet titled “What happened in Jaffna: Days of Terror” published by MIRJE graphically details of uncontrolled violence including arson that was unleashed in Jaffna May 1981 in the course of which the Jaffna public market and its shopping centre, the TULF office, the residence of the then Jaffna MP Mr V Yogeswaran and most tragically the Jaffna Public Library were set ablaze which was described by Sri Lanka’s most famous Bibliographer Ian Goonetillake as an exercise in “cultural incineration”.

Though well versed in the theoretical concepts of Marxism, Upali was not dogmatic. He was the quintessential political activist and campaigner agitating for causes he believed in. Upali was always in the vanguard of struggles of the oppressed people all over the world and played prominent roles in anti-colonialist, anti-capitalist, anti-war and anti-racist campaigns.

As the ethnic conflict escalated Sri Lanka, there was massive proliferation of human rights abuses including detention without trial, torture, extra-judicial executions and involuntary disappearances. It was during this period that Upali became one of the leading figures who set up many campaigning organisations in the UK such as the “Ceylon Solidarity Forum”, “Campaign for the Release of Political Prisoners”, “Friends of the Disappeared”, and “the Committee for Democracy and Justice in Sri Lanka”.

In regard to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, Upali firmly rejected the strategy of war and violence and forcefully argued for negotiated political settlement that recognised the legitimate rights of all nationalities. He denounced and campaigned against violations of human and democratic rights, political assassinations and other excesses for which successive Sri Lankan governments and the LTTE were responsible.

Above all, Upali was a man of action. He believed in the capacity of the downtrodden people to make a better world by transforming the exploitative socioeconomic and political conditions to which they were subjected. Believing that organising, educating and empowering of the oppressed people was the key to their emancipation, Upali helped to creating alternative institutions. He helped in setting up a Women’s Centre and a Legal Advice Centre in the Katunayaka Free Trade Zone. He set up a Resource Centre for Community Groups with modern printing machinery

and internet technologies to help community groups in mass communication. He also set up another Centre in Balangoda providing for a meeting place for Tea plantation workers. He facilitated the setting up a charity “Lanka Care” to enable bright students from poor backgrounds to further their education by the provision of financial assistance.

One of his longstanding comrades, Rajan Philips, recalls an incident to illustrate Upali’s commitment to those who have been wronged or whose rights have been violated:

***“Once riding his motorcycle in Ratmalana, he saw a man beating up his wife on the road. He stopped the bike and scared the hell out of the bully until he promised that he would never abuse his wife again. Upali was the first male feminist I came across and I can say that he was a role model to other men in shedding the convenient shackles of patriarchy and male chauvinism.”***

Upali would have celebrated his 70th birthday on the 17th of this month. Sadly it was not to be. No amount of tributes to Upali would compensate for the irretrievable loss his wife Sylvia, son Alex, and daughters Samantha and Jasmine have suffered. May they be consoled that many of Upali’s compatriots will cherish his memory and his services for ever.

Even in death, Upali stands tall as he has been throughout his life, a courageous stalwart of the Left and the valiant champion of the oppressed and marginalised.

The casket containing his mortal remains, at his own request, is draped in the red flag with the hammer and sickle and the humanist

service that is being performed today profoundly demonstrates ‘the unrepentant Marxist’ that Upali has been until his death.

Today, we bow our heads and salute Upali in celebration of his life and service to humanity which he performed with courage, conviction and dedication.

■ **P Rajanayagam**

3 rd September 2009

# **“Peace in Sri Lanka and basis for peace ”**

Speech delivered by Comrade Upali Cooray

**Conference held on 10th November 2007  
At Scarborough Civic Centre, Toronto, Canada**

Dear Comrades and friends,

**L**et me, first of all, thank the organisers Canadian for Peace for inviting me to address this meeting and needless to say that I feel, as a member of the Committee for Democracy and Justice (CDJ) in Sri Lanka honoured by your invitation. The CDJ was formed in London in the latter part of 1988 to campaign against the human rights violations in Sri Lanka under the Premadasa regime and has continued to campaign for human rights violations regardless of who has been in power.

This is the second time I am visiting Canada. The first was in 1971/72 when I toured Canada campaigning for the release of 18,000 political prisoners that were held in detention in the aftermath of the JVP debacle of April 1971. We did not campaign for their release because we agreed with the political programme or the strategy of the JVP. We did so because we firmly believe that every person, regardless of their political opinions and actions

are entitled to human and fundamental rights. Ironically, the JVP itself had repeatedly demonstrated that they themselves are not prepared to respect the human rights of others. In fact JVP is not the only culprit in this regard. Be that it may, that is their problem and not ours. Our commitment to human and democratic rights is not based on their own actions and conduct but on our belief that if we do not stand up for human rights of every single individual, regardless of what they say or do, we will soon revert to a life of savagery and barbarity.

### **Identity and peace**

I am often called upon to speak at meetings and conferences as Sinhalese. I find this label rather uneasy to bear and at least incomplete and inadequate to describe my thoughts and actions. I can remember the first time I applied for a Ceylon passport, as Sri Lanka was then called. There was a section, which asked every applicant to indicate his race. I wrote 'human' in that section and gave it to the Clerk who was going to process my application. When he saw the word human, he hit the roof and began to rant and rave at me. He asked me what do you mean you are human? Are you Sinhalese or Tamil? Having checked my name, he himself deleted human and wrote Sinhalese. I tried to explain to this stupid man that Sinhalese and Tamil are not races. We are the same race and we all come from the same African mother from where we evolved. This is not only a question of a label. It is the whole approach to life and our conduct. Perhaps the generation that followed the anti-Tamil pogroms of 1977 to 1983 pogroms, whether they be Tamil, or Sinhala may not have had much contact with the other ethnic group. It was quite different in my youth. When I was studying at Aquinas College, we did not think of people as Sinhalese or Tamils. At the time I had 5 good friends of whom 4 were Tamils. I am still in touch with the two

surviving friends – both Tamil. My first girl friend was Tamil. She said that I should convert to the Catholic faith or else she would not marry me. I desperately wanted to marry her but I could not become a Catholic because I was stark raving Communist. We are still very good friends. Ethnicity played no part at all in our relationships or in our daily life.

Every human being has many and different identities. We are lawyers, swimming teachers, classical music lovers, bird watchers, human rights activists, socialists, etc. As the Nobel Prize winning Economist Amratya Sen in his new book "Identity and Violence" explains, it is impossible to reduce human beings into a straightjacket such as Hindu or Muslim, Sinhala or Tamil or White or Black. Nationalists of all hues would like to see everybody through such a narrow and a meaningless framework. Such a tunnel vision inevitably makes us blind to reality and forces us to assess people from a fundamentally flawed point of view. For instance in London some Sinhala nationalists refer to me as an LTTE supporter whilst Tamil nationalists refer to me as an anti-Tamil. I say the first step we must take in order to achieve a just and a durable peace in Sri Lanka is to break with this methodology and to try to understand the multiplicity of identities we have and to recognise that different people prioritize different identities. How we understand other people and their identities is extremely important for the achievement of peace.

### **Spiralling violence**

Every time I attend a meeting about the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka we hear speaker after speaker catalogue the human rights violations committed by the Government of Sri Lanka, LTTE, Karuna Group etc. Each day, each week, each month and each year this catalogue becomes longer and the numbers of dead

and wounded, abducted and disappeared, destroyed and ruined increases exponentially. Then we engage in the blame game. Who did what and when? Who massacred first and who retaliated? Who is the aggressor and who is the victim? Who is bragging about their military victories and who is crying foul? I see no purpose in such exercises. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, once you adopt a policy of eye for an eye, there will be a lot of blind or one-eyed people. In my view there is nothing to commend on either side.

The starting point is to understand the reality today. It is clear that, on the one hand, the government of President Rajapakse has, so far, failed to put forward a set of proposal that would resolve the grievances of the Tamil people. While some individuals such as Professor Tissa Vitharana have indefatigably attempted to find a solution based on widest possible consensus, the government has given the impression that it is dragging its feet hoping for a military victory over the LTTE. The LTTE on the other hand, has totally rejected even the most radical of proposals (such as the one drafted by Neelan Tiruchelvam and others) that could have formed the basis of a negotiated settlement. Such intransigence has only led to the strengthening of warmongers and extremists.

### **Record of failure**

The escalation of violence with all its attendant consequences is the inevitable result of such irrational conduct of both parties. Unfortunately, the main victims of this unreasonable behaviour are the ordinary people – often the less well off section of people. Except when they are coerced to participate in mindless demonstrations in support of one party or the other, people have little influence in the decision making process. They are compelled to be onlookers and impotent bystanders. In fact ordinary people

are not expected to have any minds of their own. If they seek to express a different view from those who wield power they may soon find themselves in hot water.

Since 1978, various governments in Sri Lanka have promised that they would wipe out terrorism in a month, year, or two years etc. However, they have miserably failed to honour their promises. The LTTE too has promised the people that the final battle is at hand and that people should make their final sacrifice now. They too have failed to deliver on their promises. Neither side is accountable for their failures and blunders. The people on whom they seek support and sustenance cannot do much about it. When the leaders are proved wrong what can people do? As Bertolt Brecht once satirically suggested the answer – The Central Committee has told the people that it has made such and such a decision. The decision has proved to be wrong and unworkable. What is the solution? Dissolve the people! After all the leaders, Central Committees and governments can never do any wrong.

### **Yesterday's men**

In my humble view, neither the government nor the LTTE can tell us anything more than that we must tighten our belts, put up with death, destruction and privation again and again. They are offering more of the same. They offer us same bankrupt policies. For over thirty years we had heard this same monotonous tune. They want us do the same for the next thirty years or more.

These yesterday's men, they are mainly men, cannot resolve this problem. It is no longer permissible for the people stay on the sidelines as onlookers and bystanders. That is why we must intervene directly in the peace process. Fundamental change in society, even as far back as the Spartacus revolt, has always been

achieved when people intervened directly in the political and social process. While no one person as an individual may have all the answers to all our problems, collectively we have a wealth of experience and understanding that could be marshalled and utilised to resolve the most intractable of our problems. In any event this is not as an intractable problem as it may seem at first sight.

### **It is time to sound the tocsin**

In my view it is time to sound the tocsin and it is time to call a halt to the war. It is sufficient to give one reason why we must say 'Peace Now'. In the whole of South Asia, Sri Lanka has the highest literacy rate. Whereas the literacy rate in India is under 60% the equivalent figure for Sri Lanka is around 94%. It is country full of inventive and creative people. They have proved their mettle in every field of science and industry in every part of the world. Yet it is India and China that are racing ahead in economic development and social prosperity. While the rate of growth in USA and UK are in the region of 2% per annum for the last ten years the growth in India and China have exceeded 9%. Last year China replaced UK as the fourth largest economy. Economic analysts expect China to replace USA as the largest Economy by 2020.

Sri Lanka with its highly educated population, must hitch its wagon firmly to the growing economic process in China and India. It is IT Engineers, Accountants and Doctors that we must send abroad and not housemaids. If we waste our human and economic resources in a fruitless war for another 30 years, we will not be able to benefit from this Asian economic 'miracle'. That alone is a good reason why we must say in unison 'stop the war now'!

## **Every crisis is an opportunity**

How do we stop the war? Most of us believe that we are powerless individuals. We do not have the money, power and the guns of the government and the LTTE. We must take one side or the other, even though we do not agree with everything they do. That is not true. It is not permissible for us to ignore the atrocities both sides commit because to criticise them would give the other a propaganda advantage. It is impermissible for us to silently approve any human rights violation. As to our ability to influence events, we must remember that governments and armed movements do not operate in a vacuum. It is the silence of good men that permit them to act with impunity. If we unite and if we make our voices heard, there can be no doubt that we can prevail. I am not saying the road to peace is an easy one; but the obstacles on our way are not insurmountable. I recognise that this is a historic crisis; a crisis which appears to be intractable. I am told that in the Chinese language the word Crisis also means an opportunity. We must turn this crisis into an opportunity to find a solution to it.

## **Devolution of power**

The first step is to find a few demands that could mobilise the largest number of people. One such demand is that the government should without further delay put forward its proposals for devolution of power. We in the Committee for Democracy and Justice in Sri Lanka believe that the proposal put forward by Professor Thissa Vitaharana could be a starting point. We do not believe that a perfect solution could be found in one go. If we could agree on a broad framework, then it could be a basis for further negotiation. A broad campaign on such a demand could compel the government to stop dragging its feet on this issue. At the moment only the vociferous extremists of the JHU and JVP

are making all the noises. This demand could give a voice to a large majority of people who have repeatedly voted for solution based on devolution of power. The main focus of this demand is the government.

### **Enter the democratic process**

Secondly, if we are to make substantial headway in organising and mobilising a large section of the population around the demand for devolution of power, we must also demand that the LTTE should enter the democratic process. It is not necessary for the LTTE to use proxies. Instead it could directly participate in the electoral process and seek a democratic mandate from the people. They are entitled to seek and obtain procedural guarantees to ensure a free and a fair election. But it must genuinely enter the democratic process and convince the people that they will not resort to violence and intimidation. They must ensure that other political parties are also able to participate in the elections and compete for their party programmes without fear or favour.

### **Stop all violence**

Thirdly, we must demand that all parties must cease all forms of violence and intimidation forthwith in order to create the conditions for a negotiated political solution and free and fair elections.

I do not pretend that tomorrow the government, the LTTE and other combatants will see the light and accept these demands as a new sermon from the Mount. Nor do I put forward the aforementioned demands as a final set of demands that everyone should accept without discussion or amendment. They are merely suggestions that could and would be refined, amended or changed when people begin to mobilise. However, I am convinced that

when people begin to move, gather together, raise their voices and make themselves heard, you will see the beginning of a change; change in the way the government will think, speak and then act. Believe me sooner or later their impact would be felt in the LTTE too. When I was first arrested by the Sri Lankan police, rushed from the airport and taken to the CID headquarters, I was questioned by 7 top policemen including SP Wijesuriya, SP Jeganathan and a DIG. They were trying to implicate me in the JVP uprising. I explained to them that my idea of revolution was radically different from that of the JVP. I recalled the words of Leon Trotsky, who delivered his own defence from the dock when he was charged with treason following the failed revolution of 1905. I told the police that ‘revolution is not a situation where of people go out to the street to kill, but where thousands of people go out to the street, night after night, prepared to die, when the physical might of the soldiers is overpowered by the moral might of the people’. I firmly believe that if a substantial number of people make themselves heard, crying unison ‘peace now’, their power will substantially change the political landscape of Sri Lanka.

### **Confidence building measures**

In order to mobilise people and build their confidence we must undertake a number of measures that would empower them and enable them to become self-reliant and self-confident. I have no time to give detailed account of measures we can adopt. They range from assisting plantation youth to improve their examination skills to helping fisher folk in Batticaloa to preserve their fish catch. Those of us who live in affluent societies could make a few sacrifices in order to provide assistance to less well-off communities and help them to organise themselves, bring different communities together and avoid hardship. We must encourage all

the people regardless of the language they speak, their beliefs and their ethnicity to work together, engage in recreation all activities together and interact with each other on a regular basis.

### **Get up stand up, Stand up for your rights**

Our task today is to speak to the people, convince them and mobilise them. We have to find new and innovative means of bringing people together and provide them the courage and self-confidence to stand up to their convictions I could only conclude my words by repeating Bob Marley's song :

Get up stand up; Stand up for your rights !

Get up stand up - Don't give up the fight !

Stand up for your rights. Don't give up the fight !

Don't give up the fight !

Don't give up the fight !

# WHAT IS TO BE DONE ?

This article was written by Comrade Upali Cooray in 2008 to promote a discussion within progressive left activists and circles.

*By Upali Cooray*

## **Introduction**

**T**he decline of the socialist movement in Sri Lanka, which began in the 1960's with the decision of the LSSP to join the coalition government of Mrs. Bandaranaike has continued unabated. It is no exaggeration to say that the parties of the left have little or no influence in the country. The traditional left parties and their splinter groups have largely become political non-entities. Although the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) managed to win 30 odd seats in parliament by entering into a electoral alliance with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), it is difficult to consider the JVP as a socialist organisation. It is a populist political formation largely based on the support of the rural middle class.

There is little doubt that the eclipse of the traditional left has been one of the main causes of the rise of nationalism amongst all sections of the population. In its heyday the LSSP championed the rights of minorities and was therefore able to combat nationalist and chauvinist tendencies in the country. The JVP's populism and

its reliance on the votes of the rural constituency prevent it from adopting a robust policy of defending minority rights.

While the remnants of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party have hitched their ramshackled wagons to the SLFP, some miniscule splinter groups such as the NSSP have ended up glorifying the fascist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Although such unholy alliances have permitted them an opportunity to partake in occasional television chat shows, none of them command more than a handful of adherents.

The decline of the Sri Lankan left has not been caused by any great advances made by the capitalist parties in the economic or political terrain. In fact over the last 40 years, the economy has stagnated and the quality of life has actually declined. Apart from the apparel industry, the industrial sector has been sluggish. Sri Lanka has continued to depend on grants and loans from the major capitalist countries in the West and Japan. The only other major source of income for the state has been the remittances made by Sri Lankans working abroad.

Since the 60's Sri Lanka has witnessed the emergence of a two tier system in health care, education and transport. While a minority has been able to rely on 'international schools' and private clinics and hospitals, majority of people have witnessed a substantial deterioration in the quality of health care and education facilities provided by government hospitals and schools. The rich, including Presidents and Ministers have sent their children abroad; whilst the ordinary people are compelled compete for limited places in our colleges and universities. The privatisation of the bus service has resulted in the deterioration in transport services whilst the cost of transport has continued to rise.

In the same period the relations between different ethnic groups in Sri Lanka has worsened. Series of legislative and constitutional measures such as the Sinhala only Act and the removal of the constitutional safeguards in the Soulbury Constitution began a process of alienation that could have been resolved by an enlightened political leadership. However, the J.R.Jayawardene government by organising large scale pogroms against the Tamils, effectively expelling Tamil political representatives from Parliament and sending goons to Jaffna to rig the elections and set fire to the Jaffna Library exacerbated the situation still further. It was his policies that led to the emergence of armed Tamil groups and the subsequent war that has now continued for 28 years.

Although an attempt was made to resolve this problem through the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and the adoption of the provincial council system, this endeavour was sabotaged by the JVP and the Premadasa regime. Premadasa assisted the LTTE to suppress all other Tamil organisations which in turn led to the transformation of the LTTE into a ruthless fascist organisation, that has not only physically eliminated the leaders of other Tamil organisations but has also liquidated the Tamil intelligentsia and imposed a reign of terror in the areas they control.

Successive governments in Sri Lanka has failed to eliminate this fascist formation because the ruling elite in Sri Lanka has been either (a) corrupt and incompetence or (b) unable to implement a programme of measures designed to resolve the legitimate grievances of the Tamils, or both.

One of the reasons for their incompetence is the nature of the Constitution that was imposed by J.R Jayawardene in 1978. It has built instability in to the very system of governance. It effectively prevents the creation of a stable government and compels every

political leader to make unprincipled alliances in order to remain in power compelling them to offer ministerial posts to every Member of Parliament who joins the government.

Instead of mobilising the people to fight fascism and resolve legitimate grievances of minorities, successive governments have resorted to repressive laws and measures to deal with not only the LTTE but also other unarmed political dissidents. Arbitrary arrests, abductions, incommunicado detentions, disappearances and the failure of the police to enforce the law have seriously undermined the rule of law in Sri Lanka. In short, the capitalist parties have repeatedly demonstrated their impotence in building a stable democracy or a vibrant economy.

It is therefore surprising that the left has not been able to profit from the political impotence of the capitalist parties that has governed the country for the last 60 years. In order to understand their failure to make any meaningful headway we must analyse the underlying causes of the paralysis that has gripped these organisations. There are a number of factors that have contributed the political paralysis of the left.

### **Collapse of the Soviet Union**

Undoubtedly certain international developments have contributed to the decline of the left in Sri Lanka. One of these is the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent dissolution of the soviet bloc. The impact of this collapse should not be underestimated. It is not merely the loss of Soviet subsidies to local communist parties that weakened the left. The triumph of the West and the emergence of a unipolar world, has politically demoralised and disarmed the left. Not even the protagonists of the theory of the 'degenerated workers state' could take comfort from this collapse

because the reactionary ‘bureaucratic caste’ in the Soviet Union was not replaced by a triumphant proletarian democracy but by a ruthless oligarchy. In this context the decline of the left in Sri Lanka is part of the decline of the left internationally following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

### **Degeneration of the CCP**

Some of the leftists in Sri Lanka had hitched their wagons to the Maoist movement. However, the bizarre transformation of the Chinese Communist Party into the principal instrument of capitalist development and suppression of worker’s rights in China and the immiseration of peasants, who were idealised by the Maoists has also contributed to the decimation of the Sri Lankan left.

### **Aspects of an incomplete democratic revolution**

Although the LSSP, in its hey day, was in the forefront of the struggle for democratic change, its achievements were partial and incomplete. Even the early successes against caste oppression were later diluted at the altar of parliamentary politics. But the most backward characteristic of our society is the glorification and deification of leaders. Every political disagreement tends to be organised around individual ‘leader’ and every such dispute leads to political split. Every political split in turn leads to a split in the trade unions. Moreover, every leader remains the ‘leader for life’. Any new cadre who appears to develop signs of leadership is purged by one means or another. Fortunately, most of these organisations did not have an armed wing. Otherwise, like Mahattaya, a lot of the leftist cadres would have been physically eliminated. Their undemocratic practices lead to atomisation of organisations and demoralisation of new cadres.

Equally, disturbing is the suppression of democratic discussion and debate both inside and outside the left organisation.<sup>1</sup> Within the left parties a variety of procedural rules are imposed in order to suppress democratic debate. The suppression of political debates range from defaming political opponents to physical attacks. The JVP is particularly adept at physical attacks on political opponents. Such policies indicate the weakness and vulnerability of their ideological position. Often the leadership is unable to defend their woolly and confused political positions and they have no alternative but to suppress dissent. Again such practices have alienated and demoralised many of honest political activists.

Quite apart from procedural roadblocks that prevent democratic discussion, some political groups often resort to libel and slander of their political opponents in order to discourage their members from interacting with other activists. Political opponents are dubbed ‘capitalist stooges’, ‘CIA agents’ ‘Chauvinists’ etc. These labels are appended to their opponents solely in order to prevent democratic discussion. The ‘leaders’ want to maintain a tight control over their foot soldiers and prevent them from undertaking a critical assessment of their policies or developing ideas that may, even remotely, challenge their hegemony. These practices prevent young activists developing a critical mind essential for understanding the social reality that they have to confront.

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1. I recall an instance where a well known leftist and a trade union leader castigating the government because it had proposed a new law that would compel trade unions to elect their leaders regularly. When I pointed out that Lenin too had prescribed such a course of action in “State and Revolution”, he responded by saying that was what Lenin prescribed for a post-revolutionary society! I explained that unless workers are trained to be leaders before the revolution, they will not be able to do so after the revolution. The same people who have had the experience will continue to wield power resulting the emergence in a bureaucracy, as it did in Soviet Union and China,

Such organisational measures and practices are essentially vestiges of feudalism. They reflect the law of uneven and combined development in our social formation. Leaders are treated as demi-gods and they can never be dislodged from their positions of “power. This ultimately led to their degeneration. Democratic accountability and transparency is essential for the development of new ideas, training new cadres, minimising bureaucratic control and preventing the ruling elite “buying off” able leaders.

A new left movement must break with such feudal practices and adopt widest possible debate and discussion within it, regular rotation of administrative posts, transparency in the election and removal of leaders and democratic accountability.

### **Living in a time warp**

Almost all Sri Lankan leftist parties to a greater or lesser extent subscribed to the idea that revolutionary change in Sri Lanka would more or less mirror the ‘Russian experience’. Although the pro-Chinese wing of the Communist Party, supported the CCP against the ‘Russian revisionists’, they did not actually advocate that they should adopt the tactic of long guerrilla war in Sri Lanka. Even the JVP did not radically break with the ‘Russian model’ of revolutionary change. They differentiated themselves from the others only on the basis that the traditional left parties have become revisionists and therefore they were either disinterested in the existence of a revolutionary situation or have failed to recognise the existence of a revolutionary situation. Hence the decision of the JVP in 1971 and again 1988, to make a bid for power by ‘revolutionary means’. Like the other leftists, they too believed that the capitalist state could and should be overthrown by one major revolutionary action. Admittedly there some differences between them and other leftists about the social forces that would play a leading role in revolutionary process. While the traditional

leftists spoke about the vanguard role of the workers, the JVP spoke of the 'proletarian class' because they relied mainly on rural youth and certain lumpen elements in urban areas.

However, all the leftist groups and parties, including the JVP subscribed to the view that the revolution would be accomplished by a single assault on the capitalist state, much like the armies of the yore trounced their enemies in one major combat, even if it was fought on many fronts and even if the process was prolonged one.

Certain Trotskyist groups provided even a more simplistic formula. They believed that the party could use a single trade union struggle to develop a generalised struggle of workers and other oppressed people leading to a general strike; the mass mobilisation of the workers and the oppressed people would inevitably lead to a social revolution, provided the workers were led by the right people (i.e. by their leader or leaders). Thus the revolution is a relatively simple process. A strike in some place could result in a general politicisation of the workers who in turn will be ready to join a general strike. Revolutionary leadership of the workers would then develop that struggle further and transform it from an economic struggle to a social struggle for the overthrow of the ruling class.

Even before the Second World War, the Italian Communist thinker, Antonio Gramsci had criticised this thesis and pointed out since the First World War, even the nature of military conflict had changed. After the First World War it was no longer possible for battle ready armies to trounce their foe in one fell swoop. Now the armies had to fight trench by trench, inch by inch, terrain by terrain, and region by region. That changed the nature of warfare altogether. It was long and an arduous process, where the general

staff had to manage many battlefields at once and fought in different terrains, using a variety of means.

Gramsci used this analogy to argue that the struggle for socialism would no longer be achieved by one great revolution. In other words the struggle for socialism would be a very protracted one. Moreover, it would be fought on many fronts and terrains. Furthermore, the struggle cannot be confined to politics alone. The struggle for socialism has to be fought in every terrain - ideology, art, education, trade unions, co-operatives etc.

Gramsci seems to have, instinctively, understood the huge problems that Soviet Union was facing where the Bolsheviks had taken power but where the people, including workers and even their own party members were still steeped in backward and even reactionary ideas on many social and political issues.

This is true of many leftists in Sri Lanka. Many members, and even certain leaders, have either little knowledge of many important historical or social issues or they hold quite traditional or reactionary views. Often they do not understand the nature of oppression of women and the right of women to organise as an autonomous force.<sup>2</sup> Some are influenced by caste, social status and ethnic background of others. Most are woefully ignorant of movements outside their own country. The struggle for socialism is

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2 I recall a conversation I once had with my old friend Newton Gunasinghe. He told me that once he was travelling to Kandy and he found himself in the company of a leftist leader. In the course of their conversation the leftist leader asked Newton why he has not thought of getting married. He replied by saying that marriage is not a simple issue and that one must find someone with whom you could generally agree and interact politically. Newton was quite shocked when the Leftist leader responded by saying that 'no, no, you should not bother to discuss politics with women'.

limited to the political pulpit or the ‘General Council’ of the Trade union. Yet others, who claim to be ‘Marxists’ would continue to pretend that they are devout Catholics or Buddhists and not flinch from genuflecting before the most reactionary priests or monks. Some even employ servants to do their chores at home. There is a yawning gap between the theories they espouse and their day to day practice.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the total degeneration of the CCP, the analysis of Gramsci has become even more relevant and important. In other words the need to take a long view of history has become even more obvious. The struggle for socialism is now even a more protracted one that it was before the collapse of the Soviet Union. The victories we achieve have to be fought for trench by trench. That means the struggle cannot be led and masterminded by a few select leaders at the top. Nor can it be accomplished by a single formula or a single manifesto. Marx himself explained that the struggle for socialism would be a protracted one and that it would involve revisiting issues that we thought we had resolved again and again. This requires a constant examination and reexamination of our political standpoints, analysis and conclusions.

It also means the nature of political organisations must change. Instead of the administratively centralised party apparatus that could do no wrong and must be defended at any cost, the emphasis should be on the creation of a vibrant, pluralist, critical and a lively movement, that seek to challenge capitalist and precapitalist ideology in every terrain of our society. Criticism and self-criticism must be the very essence of our outlook. Such a movement will draw in the energies of thousands and will create the conditions for new and progressive ideas to proliferate.

■ **Upali Cooray**

# REBUILDING THE LEFT MOVEMENT IN SRI LANKA

*By Upali Cooray*

- 1.** **I**n this paper I would argue that, today, more than ever, there is an urgent need to rebuild the left movement in Sri Lanka. Although 60 years have elapsed since the British colonial rulers transferred political power to the Sri Lankan elite, certain developmental goals that the left movement addressed itself to in early 40's still remain unfulfilled.
- 2.** At the outset I must insist that when I speak of rebuilding the left I do not include organisations that directly or indirectly pursue undemocratic and chauvinist aims and those who directly or indirectly support fascist or fascist type movements as a part of the left movement. Thus I exclude the JVP as a part of the left movement because it is both a chauvinist and an undemocratic political formation. On the other hand I will include organisations which have arisen primarily within the framework of the Tamil nationalist movement, but which have either had adopted a leftist political standpoint from its inception or have evolved in leftward direction over

a period of time. The best example of such a formation is the Elam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) - Pathmanaba wing.

3. It is therefore important for the comrades of the LSSP, CP and other political groups which had various times split from the LSSP and the CP to initiate the task of rebuilding the left movement. In doing so we must attract comrades of progressive organisations in the Tamil national movement, and from the progressives in the Muslim community and the Up-country Tamil community.
4. This is not an easy task. Nor can we force the pace of such a reunification and restructuring of the left movement. It will take a great deal of effort, time and patience. Otherwise, each unification may lead to further splits, thus negating the whole objective we are seeking to achieve.
5. In order to rebuild a strong left movement we must avoid some of the old errors we have committed and consider anew some of the traditional view we have held for years or even decades. The object of this paper is not to provide a blueprint for rebuilding the left movement. No single person could provide all the answers to all the questions we face. Therefore it is an attempt to contribute towards a discussion of the issues we must face, tasks we must fulfil and the organisational structures we must develop in the next few years.

### **Need for a long view of history**

6. Firstly, we need to have a clear understanding of the nature of the present epoch. Clearly, we are at the present time we are

not living in a prerevolutionary situation. Even in countries where there have been radical political upheavals in the recent period – such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, - there is no immediate prospect of a radical change in their system of property ownership. While they have taken important and radical steps to reduce poverty and inequality, they still function within the framework of the capitalist system. That means we must have a long view of history.

That means we have to set ourselves tasks that have to be achieved over a long period. Further, our struggle, as the Italian Communist theorist, Antonio Gramsci, expounded, our struggle must not be confined to political and economic spheres alone. We must fight reactionary and rightwing ideology in every terrain – education, culture, art, social activities, sports etc. This means that we must have a much wider perspective than the one we have traditionally adopted.

### **Break with sectarian politics**

7. Most left organisations have been beset by a deep-seated and a chronic sectarian outlook that prevents free discussion and collective action. The classic defence of this crass sectarianism came from a keynote speaker at a particular “trotskyst” group conference in the 70’s when he compared the members of his group to ‘homo sapiens’ and described other trotskysts as Apes, baboons and Chimpanzees, because at a certain stage of development the homo sapiens had evolved in a specific directions and they no longer evolved in the manner Apes and baboons did. This was, of course, utter nonsense. There was no biological or scientific basis for such an idiotic conclusion. While present day sectarianism may not be as absurd as the position adopted by this person,

nevertheless most of us subscribe to a distorted view of the 'Leninist' or 'Bolshevik' party. Apart from the fact the concept of the 'Leninist' party itself developed at a particular historical juncture to deal with a specific historical situation, the Bolshevik party was by no means a monolithic organisation, which prevented pluralism and democracy. In fact in period between 1905 and 1917 there were literally hundreds of different publications, which were published by different branches or groups within the Russian Social Democratic Party.

8. Every political party and group will have an internal organisation and a structure and I do not propose that they should be dissolved. It is too early to say how the left will evolve in the future. All that I am arguing is that we must not put artificial barriers to common action. For instance, when some new incident occurs or a new situation arises, there may be a spontaneous reaction to that event. One group or a few individuals may organise some action or issue a statement. In such circumstances we must not impose artificial or bureaucratic hurdles to develop solidarity action with those who were propelled into such a struggle. If there are political objections to taking such solidarity action that is entirely understandable. But such objections must not be based on sectarian motives. The issue is not who initiates an action or under whose banner it is proposed but what is the net result of the action and what will be the final outcome of proceeding with it. If the proposed action leads to an outcome that would extend democratic rights, bring benefits to the people or defeat the right wing etc, then we must support it regardless of the person or organisation that initiated it.

## **Promoting unity and democracy amongst the oppressed**

9. Splits in the left parties have almost always accompanied by splits in workers, youth and peasant organisations. We must radically break with this practice and completely reverse this trend. We must work towards the re-unification of the all peoples' organisations. Every political current must have the democratic right to express itself in every peoples' organisation subject to the normal constraints necessary for such an organisation to effectively function.

## **Actively promoting new economic organisational forms**

10. Although leftist of all hues speak about socialism, collective property and common ownership, in our day-to-day life is almost entirely governed by capitalist ethics. It is often difficult for even experienced comrades to break with this ideological grip. That is why it is essential for the left movement to develop new forms of economic organisations or organisational methods both inside and outside Peoples' organisations. I can give three examples of such organisational forms that have been extremely successful.
  1. The Mondragon co-operative movement in Basque region of Spain. This movement arose to combat the repressive policies of the Franco regime. It combines co-operative principles with individual incentive. Mondragon has set up some of the most technologically advanced industries in Spain. They also own their own Bank.
  2. Gonosoktha Kendraya in Bangladesh provide free health care facilities to the poor. They combat the

greed of private medical practitioners and manufacture their own generic drugs.

3. Credit Unions in United Kingdom. Credit Unions exist in a number of Northern Towns of the UK. They provide their members (Workers) loans at low interest rates. This enables workers to avoid loan sharks.

There are many other organisational forms that oppressed people in different parts of the world have adopted. We can study them and develop our own organisational forms that could strengthen working class independence and solidarity.

### **Promoting accountability and modernisation**

The left should be in the vanguard of promoting modernisation and breaking down bureaucratic barriers to development. Often people are unable to exercise their rights because of artificial barriers that have been placed by elitist and interest groups. The best example is those of lawyers and doctors. The long delays in the legal system and the cost of litigation is almost entirely due to a system that deliberately permits lawyers to make litigation unnecessary complicated and permits interminable delay thus creating conditions for lawyers to profit by their monopoly power. Furthermore, ordinary people have no meaningful remedies against negligent or incompetent lawyers and doctors. The left must be in the vanguard of campaigning for a modernised and streamlined system of legal and medical services (Learn from Cuba) and to propose concrete steps to make them more people friendly, efficient and accessible.

### **Widening educational opportunities**

Over the last 30 years the free education and medical system have been radically changed by the elitist who have run our country.

Today, in effect, there is a twotier system both in education and medicine. The rich send their children to ‘international schools and to foreign countries’ while the rest have to put up with deteriorating standards in education. Chandrika, Mahinda, Premachandran and Prabhakaran send their children abroad to study while the children of ordinary people compete for a woefully inadequate number of places in local universities. The provision of medical services is the same. What is even more disheartening is the fact that students who are able to qualify as doctors, lawyers etc thanks to the freed education system do not feel that they have any obligations to the society that provided the facilities for them to qualify as high earning professionals. Instead, from day one, they feel that they have a god given right to fleece the people who obtain their services. This erosion of ethical values has now spread to ordinary schools too. Instead of providing a decent education, a lot of teachers have become accustomed to making money by resorting to the ‘tuition racket’. The left must campaign against these unethical practices and propose meaningful measures to expand opportunities for higher education. For instance there is no reason why higher education should not be funded by an interest free system of student loans except to those who come very poor families. These loans could be recouped from them after they get employed.

### **Immediate task**

In rebuilding the left movement there are some immediate tasks, which we must seek to achieve within a short time. Firstly, we must reorganise our propaganda activities. The left desperately needs a regular newspaper, a theoretical journal and a website - in Sinhala, Tamil and English. Secondly, we must reach agreement on a number of policy issues and publish our policy statements and the arguments in support of such policies in a

series of well-prepared booklets. Thirdly, we must organise a programme of seminars, **particularly in rural and plantation** areas to popularise our politics, attract new members and to educate our cadres. Fourthly, we must utilise the new technology - Internet etc - to build powerful networks amongst the oppressed and to organise effective communication with our members and supporters. Finally, we must build international build links with leftist groups particularly in South Asian countries.

I was asked to write this paper at short notice (two days). Obviously a lot of the proposals and suggestions in this paper need more detailed analysis. If any comrades require clarifications I am more than happy to provide them.

■ **Upali Cooray**

2008

# **FINAL WRITINGS**

By

**Comrade Upali Cooray**

## **The triumphalism and jingoism does not accurately reflect the reality**

**Comrade Upali Cooray's First Letter  
to his Grand Nephew**

Dear Grand nephew,

I have omitted your name, because the purpose of this letter is not to embarrass or humiliate you. However, my attention has been drawn to the triumphalist and jingoist remarks that you have posted on Facebook. I do not intend to repeat them here but it is obvious that you have been swept by the chauvinist fever following the military defeat of the LTTE. I would have expected a young man of your education and intellect to exercise a more critical analysis of the events of the past few months in Sri Lanka.

Firstly, your triumphalism and jingoism does not accurately reflect the reality. Claims such as 'Sri Lankan Army is the Greatest in the World' are obviously inaccurate. According to the government, the operations in the last few months have resulted in the death of over 6000 soldiers. Many more have suffered serious injuries. If we compare this to what the Indian peace-keeping force

[IPKF] incurred during a two year operation, the figure of 6000 is extremely high. At the time the IPKF were ordered to leave Sri Lanka by president Premadasa, egged on by the JVP and some elements of the SLFP, they had surrounded the LTTE leadership and were about to deal a decisive defeat on the LTTE. Yet the IPKF lost just over 1000 soldiers. If one compares other theatres of war such as Iraq and Afghanistan, the casualty rate of the Sri Lankan security forces is extremely high. This of course does not detract from the role the armed forces played in defeating the LTTE and many people may be relieved by the fact the ethnic conflict has at least, for the time being, come to an end. That is impermissible, however, is to go overboard in assessing the outcome of this armed conflict. Furthermore, this triumphalism fails to recognise the enormous destruction of life and property this conflict engendered, including thousands of civilians who lost their lives.

Secondly, your triumphalism fails to consider the deep-rooted problems that gave rise armed rebellion by a section of the Tamil people. It deleted from history the anti-Tamil riots of 1977, the burning down of the most valuable libraries in Jaffna in 1981. The pogrom of 1983 which resulted in wide-spread attacks of Tamils all over the country and the systematic torture and disappearances that many Tamil activists were subjected to by the security forces. If we are to resolve this problem what we need today is magnanimity in victory and not triumphalism. We must extend our hand of friendship to those who we do not necessarily agree with. We must seek reconciliation and not further confrontation. We must listen to their grievances and go half way in meeting their demands. Besides, your triumphalism is alien to our culture, for instance, after defeating Elara, King Dutugemunu ordered that every horseman must dismount when he reached the tomb of Elara as a mark of respect to very man Dutugemunu had defeated

in war. That is the spirit in which we must approach the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka.

Thirdly, we must not believe that simply because the LTTE has been defeated today, other armed rebellions will not occur in the future. You cannot repress and deprive the rights of any group of people forever. As long as people feel that they do not enjoy equal rights and justice, there will always be people who will organise armed rebellions. It is important to note that there are substantial number of Tamils, in Sri Lanka, Tamil Nadu, South Africa, Europe and North America who feel that Tamils in Sri Lanka are second class citizens that their life and liberty are at risk. While some of these claims may be exaggerated, the importance is that there is a substantial body of very wealthy people around the globe who would be prepared to bankroll other armed actions to achieve dignity and equal rights. You cannot keep an ethnic minority suppressed permanently by armed force. You can see that from the history of the Palestinian struggle. Despite the superior fire power, arms and support of the West, each day, month and year more and more young Palestinians come forward to lay down their lives to achieve justice. Israel can never achieve secure borders or peace by sheer armed might. In any event we cannot afford another costly war. Therefore, what we need is not triumphalism but an attempt to understand the grievances of the Tamils and creating an institutional framework for ensuring fairness and equal rights to all communities. Your triumphalism does not recognise the importance of this monumental task facing us.

I was saddened by the nature of the messages you had posted in the Facebook. I thought that you had the strength of character to withstand the chauvinist hysteria that swept through the country after the defeat of the LTTE. Sometimes it is important to swim against the current in order to stand by your moral values. I hope

you will reconsider your views and adopt a more sober attitude. After all equanimity in the face of both triumph and disaster is the essence of our culture. Our culture and tradition teaches us to adopt an attitude of equanimity in the face of profit and loss, wealth and poverty, disparagement and praise and happiness and unhappiness (Labho Alabho, Ayaso yasocho, Ninda prasnsa, sukancha dukkham).

Yours affectionately

**Upali Cooray**

Podi Seeya (Grand uncle)

# **We need a new movement**

## **Comrade Upali Cooray's Second Letter to his Grand Nephew**

Dear Grandnephew ,

1. **W**hen I wrote my first letter to you I was extremely ill. I had a rare infection followed by a knee operation; my knee was extremely painful and swollen and I was generally unwell. I could not walk or sit near a computer. Most of the day I spent in bed. In fact I had to dictate that letter I sent you and Samantha kindly typed it for me. I left out many issues, and perhaps, I could have argued some of the issues I raised in a more cogent manner. Nevertheless, I believe that I was able to get across the essential points I wanted to make. My letter and your response were published widely and there were a large number of comments about its contents. Your response demonstrated that you are a very responsible, intelligent and a compassionate young man and I must say that I am proud to have a grandnephew like you. In one website alone there were some 138 responses to my letter. Most of those comments were quite positive but there were some peanut brains that even accused me of

being an LTTE supporter. Since you know about my standpoint on the LTTE, my steadfast commitment to democracy, pluralism and human rights and my implacable opposition to militarism and recruitment and deployment of child soldiers, I do not think it is worth responding to such imbeciles. However there were other issues I would have liked to deal with in my first letter and hence my decision to write you this second letter.

### **Lack of material**

2. It is unfortunate that today, most young people in Sri Lanka have little critical material to read and study about our history and culture. The net result is that there is a lot of misinformation that is peddled by the media. Ultra - nationalists - both Tamil and Sinhala – feed on this misinformation, myth and legend. Rarely are these misconceptions challenged. Take for example the concept of race. Often people in Sri Lanka believe that Tamils and Sinhalese are two different races. I can still remember the day I applied for my first passport. In the application form there was one section where you had to specify your race. Although I guessed the purpose of that question was to ascertain whether I was Sinhala or Tamil, I knew that neither were distinct racial groups. Therefore I filled in that section by writing ‘human’. The clerk, who took the passport application from me, hit the roof. He got hysterical and shouted at me and said what do you mean ‘human’? Are you Sinhalese or Tamil ? Although I tried to reason with him and explain that we are not distinct races, it fell on deaf ears. He took the form, deleted human and wrote ‘ Sinhalese’. Such lack of scientific and critical outlook permeates all

aspect of our society.

### **DNA profiles**

3. Recently, in England, a researcher interviewed a number of people who believed that they were of pure English or of Caucasian origins. Thereafter he carried out DNA tests on them. Most of these people assumed that they were either from good Anglo-Saxon or Norman stock or at least had North European ancestry. Surprisingly, in most cases their DNA indicated that they were not from North Europe. They had Mongolian, Moroccan and Turkish DNA. You will probably find the same if we carry out DNA profiles of some of the most upbeat chauvinists of Sri Lanka in order to determine which part of India or some other part of the globe his or her ancestors originated from. People in Sri Lanka are quite mixed. For instance the Karawas (caste) are descendants of South Indian mercenaries who were brought to our shores by Sri Lankan kings. They later settled on the western coastal belt. The same is true of Salagamas and the Durawas. They all have their origins in South India. If you think Kandyans are pure Sinhalese, you will be disappointed. A number of our later kings and queens were from South India. Although the King had an official wife (Queen) he could sleep with any woman he found attractive. That was his privilege. Those days there was no birth control and the illegitimate children of the king were called 'Bandaras'. There are an awful lot of Bandaras about. That is not all. During the British period, a Kaffir Regiment was brought from South Africa. They gradually settled and married local people and became a part of the population. Later on, Malays from Malaya (now Malaysia) settled in our country. There were also Malayalee Toddy

tappers from Kerala who came and settled and inter-married the locals. We are also mixed with Portuguese, Dutch, British, etc. The same is true of Tamils. Amongst them is caste called the 'Koviyars'. They were in fact Sinhalese prisoners (goviyars) captured in war and later became integrated into the Northern community. Moreover, the repression of the 1848 rebellion was quite ferocious. The British raj killed many people who rebelled against their rule. Thousands of others who escaped repression, fled to Wanni and settled there. Thus some of the people who later came to settle in the Wanni are most probably descendants of the Sinhalese who fled the 1848 repression.

### **Buddhagosa was a Tamil**

4. It is equally stupid to argue that the existence of archaeological evidence of Buddhist temples in the North and East indicates that these areas were always inhabited by the Sinhalese. During those early years of our history, Buddhism was the religion of not only the Sinhalese but also the Tamils. For instance, one of the greatest Buddhist theoreticians, Buddhagosa, was a Tamil.
5. Obviously, there are linguistic and some cultural differences between the Sinhala and Tamil. But here too we must not exaggerate. There are lot of words that are common to both languages. In reality Sinhalese and Tamils have many more common features than differences. Ultra-nationalist on both sides of the divide want to exaggerate these differences and does so for ulterior motives. That is why remarks of some people to the effect that 'all Tamils are from South India and they should return there' are extremely stupid. And how would these charlatans treat Lord Buddha ? He was not a

Sinhalese – He was from Varanasi in northern India.

### **Sinhala Buddhism is a contradiction in terms**

6. Equally the concept of ‘Sinhala Buddhism’ is a contradiction in terms. Buddhism is a universal philosophy and cannot be confined to a particular group of human beings. Buddha did not recognise a ‘chosen race’ or a ‘chosen ethnic group’. To the extent one attempts to ‘Sinhalese’ it, Buddhism loses its validity and its rationale. Such a tribal ideology has nothing in common with Buddhism. This corruption of Buddhism has not stopped there. It has further degenerated into a division along caste lines. Thus we have the Siyam Nikaya for the Goigamas, Ramnaya Nikaya for the Salagamas and the Amaapura Nikaya for the Karawas. Such provincialism and tribalism has nothing in common with the tenets of this great philosophy. In Britain Christianity in the form of the Anglican Church became a tool of the rulers. Buddhism has also been corrupted as ‘Sinhala Buddhism’ to serve the needs of the dominant ruling class and in doing so has robbed it of its core values. It is unnecessary dwell on these matters at length because you are conversant with my antipathy towards the parasites that live off hard working people in the land. Yet try to dictate to the world how we should behave and even what we should think.

### **Denying the grievances of Tamils**

7. Hiding behind these erroneous and patently illogical concepts of race and religion, ‘Sinhala’ Ultra-nationalists assert that the Tamils in Sri Lanka are aliens or recent immigrants and that their grievances all imaginary or concocted complaints to preserve their privileges. Like the holocaust deniers they try to minimise the impact of pogroms of 1977, 1981 and

1983, the widespread torture, murder and disappearances of Tamil youths between 1978 and 2009 and the repression and discrimination some of them have suffered on a daily basis. They ignore or minimise the impact of the Sinhala only policy, which Tamils perceived as an attempt to deprive them of their fundamental rights.

### **Tamil nationalists also fail to see the reality**

8. On the other hand Tamil ultra-nationalists erroneously consider that it is only the Tamils in the North and East who have suffered repression, discrimination and marginalisation. They ignore the repression and exploitation the rural poor in Sri Lanka have had to endure over decades. For instance in 1988-89 over 60,000 mainly Sinhala youths were 'disappeared' by the Premadasa government. (The irony is that one of the leading members of that government - Mr. Ranil Wickremesinghe-is now one the most vociferous 'defenders of human rights' ! However, to date he has not apologised or show any remorse for the vile and abominable crimes his government committed in 1988-89 ). Tamil nationalists fail to recognise that the majority of Sinhala villagers in Sri Lanka live in dire poverty and have much more restricted educational opportunities than most Tamils who live in Colombo or Jaffna. Tamil nationalists also ignore the numerous problems that Tamil plantation workers have to endure. It would not be an exaggeration to say that in fact, the most disadvantaged people in Sri Lanka are the plantation workers the rural poor (Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim) and women. They have always had a raw deal. In 1958, I went to Karandeniya Central School to teach. I was appalled by the fact that most teachers in this school felt that the children of this (so called low caste) locality

should not be taught because if they get educated they will become uppity. Even today the situation is not very different in many rural areas. In Pussellawa there are Sinhala and Tamil children who do not go to school because they cannot afford to buy a pair of shoes. Recently the organisation I work with, gave some money to a local welfare organisation in Pussellawa to buy shoes and school bags for a few children in that area. The help we gave was a drop in the ocean. There are tens of thousands of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim children who are malnourished; they are lucky to have two meals a day. That is not all. People who live in rural areas suffer other disadvantages. For instance they can rarely get justice from the police or the courts. There are about 100,000 plantation workers who do not have birth certificates or have birth certificates that provide wrong information. For that reason they cannot obtain an identity card and if they are caught walking around without an ID card they get arrested and locked up. Equally many women in our society suffer discrimination, domestic and sexual violence.<sup>3</sup> The days when a lone woman could ‘walk from Hambantota to Point Pedro unmolested’ are gone for ever.

## **Identity and culture**

9. Ultra-nationalists - both Sinhala and Tamil have a jaundiced view of the reality. Each in their own way distorts and misrepresent the reality. In doing so they fail to see that

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3 Women are often doubly or trebly oppressed. They suffer sexual harassment and domestic violence, they are compelled to shoulder most of the household chores and have to shoulder the major, if not sole, responsibility for bringing up children. If they are employed, then they have to fulfil these tasks while doing a full time job. Thus they suffer a double oppression as a woman and a worker. If she belongs to a minority, she may suffer threefold oppression.

there are many sections of the population that suffer exploitation, repression and discrimination. They compel us to see everything from the narrow prism of ethnicity. Apart from our 'ethnic' origins we have many identities and interests. We are not merely people who speak Tamil or Sinhala. We are also scientists or economists or lawyers, students or factory workers, musicians or cricket or football enthusiasts, archaeologists etc. Amratya Sen, the Noble prize winning Indian Economist, in his book *Identity and Violence*, rightly points out that we have several identities and we do not look at the world merely from the narrow framework of ethnicity or religion.

### **Living in the past**

10. Furthermore, both Sinhala and Tamil nationalists live in the distant past. They hark back to an imaginary golden age in the ancient or medieval history. They seek to idealise a non-existent golden age of the yester years. For this very reason their ideology is backward and retrogressive. They are like frogs in the well that have little understanding of the enormous scientific and technological progress that are being made in the world. They ignore the massive struggles working people all over the world have made in order to win even limited rights we enjoy today. People are no longer tied to the land of the feudal overlords or have to work 14 to 16 hours a day. Through struggles the toilers of the world have broken some of the chains. It is the inward looking ideology of the ultra-nationalists that resulted in 30 years of death and destruction. Although the Sinhala chauvinists are now dancing in the street in a frenzy of triumphalism, they fail to recognise that the rise of separatism is a direct consequence of the failure of our ruling elite to build a Sri Lankan nation. In 1989 I was called to chair the funeral of

an EPRLF Member of Parliament, Mr. Yogasangari, who was murdered by the LTTE in Madras.<sup>4</sup> Since his wife and family lived in the UK, his funeral took place in London. One of the persons invited to speak at his funeral was an important political leader who later became the President of Sri Lanka. She sought to commiserate the wife of Yogasangari by saying “madam, your people and my people have both suffered from terrorist violence”. Although the speaker and Mrs. Yogasangari were both Sri Lankans, she found it necessary to make a distinction between Sinhalese and Tamils. That was quite inappropriate and unnecessary. On the other hand, in neighbouring India, the ruling elite has successfully built an Indian nation. That is a unique achievement in a country where there are many ethnic groups and over 300 languages and dialects. Inhabitants of India, whether they are from Kerala, or Bengal, Punjab or Maharashtra will always call themselves, first and foremost, Indians and not as Malayalees, Sikhs, Bengalis or Maratis. Until recently the President of India was a Muslim. Today the Prime Minister is a Sikh, the Interior Minister is a Dravidian, the Speaker of the Parliament is a Harijan and the leader of the ruling party is an Italian. They have achieved a unity in diversity which we can only dream of. We have failed because of the narrow and provincial outlook of our ruling elite.

11. Ultra-nationalists want us to dwell on traditions that have outlived their usefulness. They fail to understand the need to adapt ourselves to the needs of the 21st century. It is not by accident that the constitution of one of these ultra

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4 On that occasion the LTTE murdered some 13 EPRLF members including its leader Padmanabha in Madras.

nationalist ‘Sinhala’ parties debar women from holding office. They think women are only good to bear children and do household chores even though, from the point of view of academic excellence, Sri Lankan women have proved that they are as good or better than their male counterparts. In reality most of these ‘ultra nationalists’ are hypocrites. While preaching Sinhala only to the masses, many send their children to universities in USA, UK and Australia. Their real objective is to perpetuate their elite status

12. We must combat these backward and outdated ideologies and look to the future and not the past. Today we are witnessing a massive shift of economic power from the West to the East. China and India have become the new power houses of economic growth. In the next 10 to 15 years, the two most affluent countries in the world would be China and India. Within the next few years China will replace Japan as the second largest economy and by 2020 it is expected to overtake USA. India too is following closely behind and today some Indian firms are major players in the global economy. India has also taken a bold step to abolish the rural debt, provide a minimum of 100 days work per year to the rural workers and has consistently achieved growth rates of 7% or over.
13. We could either equip ourselves to benefit from this “eastern economic miracle” or be left behind dreaming about the ‘golden age’ of yesteryears while engaging in more internecine violence and ethnic conflicts. In one sense we are better placed to modernise and achieve a high level of prosperity than our neighbours because our literacy rate is much higher than theirs. The literacy rate of Sri Lanka is

nearly 95% as opposed to 55 to 66% in Pakistan and India.<sup>5</sup> Our greatest wealth is human capital. Yet we do not make optimum use of our literate and educated youth. Today, after 62 years of independence we are not able to provide university education even for 10% of those who qualify to gain entry to a university.<sup>6</sup> Although some of those who do not gain entry into the universities may enrol on accountancy and other professional courses, nevertheless the number of students who are capable of pursuing higher studies but unable to find places in institutions of higher education is extremely high. This is a criminal waste of our human capital.

### **Lagging behind our neighbours**

14. While India and China is developing rapidly we are lagging behind. Most professions - lawyers, doctors, teachers etc. have not modernised in order to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For instance the legal system of Sri Lanka today is more akin to the state affairs that Charles Dickens described in Bleak House (Jarndyce vs Jarndyce) than a system suitable for a modern democracy. Legal disputes that

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5 The literacy rate in **Sri Lanka** in 2009 was 91.5 (Males 93.2 and Females 91.6), in **India** 66% ( Males 76.9 and Females 54.5), in **Pakistan** 54.9 (Males 68.7 and Females 40.2), in **Bangladesh** 53.5 (Males 58.7 and Females 48) and in **Nepal** 56.5 (Males 70.3 and Females 43.6) - Source : MSN 2007.

The literacy Rates for 2009 provided by the Guardian (UK) are **Sri Lanka** 90.8, **India** 65.5, **Pakistan** 54.2, **Bangladesh** 52.5 and **Nepal** 55.2.

6 In 2006/7 the total number of students enrolled in all the Universities were 10,463. In 2006 the number of students who sat A Level examination and qualified to enter a University was 119,867. Moreover only about a third of these students were enrolled on science, medicine, Dental and Food science courses (*Source: Statistical Abstract of the Sri Lankan government*)

can be resolved in six months or a year, drag on for years or even decades. The only beneficiaries of this system are the lawyers. Most doctors are only interested in amassing wealth rather than ensuring the well being of patients. Often, even after paying a hefty fee, most doctors would compel patients to queue outside their surgeries like cattle, hours on end. There is no effective regulatory system of these professions and there is no effective statutory body, which supervise their conduct. Teachers do not regularly update their knowledge or adopt more modern methods of teaching. There is an urgent need to regulate these public services, increase their efficiency and ensure that they serve the interests of the public and not merely those of the service providers. We can study the provision of medical services in a small country like Cuba and observe the difference. Cuba, with a population of 11 million educates over 5000 medical students each year.<sup>7</sup> Cuba has eliminated diseases such as malaria, diphtheria, chicken pox, measles, whooping cough and dengue. In Sri Lanka while there has been a proliferation of private hospitals and clinics, mostly money-making enterprises, the medical care in government hospitals have deteriorated very substantially. We must modernise our transport system and make it more environmentally friendly. We must outlaw the prevailing 'tuition' racket where teachers mint money by giving private tuition to the very children they should be teaching during school hours. We must insist that the licence to practice their profession, be they lawyers, teachers or doctors, will depend on their readiness to update their knowledge through

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7 This figure is based on Fidel Castro's response to a question by his biographer Ignacio Ramonet - **See Fidel Castro – My Life**

a programme of continuing education. The list of what we have to accomplish is endless because our ruling elite have been both lackadaisical and incompetent.

### **Men without a vision**

15. Unfortunately, the older generation, including most of our political leaders lacks foresight and vision. They fail to recognise that the riches that can be made by modernising our country, is hundred times greater than the crumbs they are now able to exact by engaging in petty corrupt practices. They have little interest or inclination to modernise our country. For instance while many middle class young men and women are able to communicate through the internet ( chat, blog and twitter), most of our lawmakers, teachers, public servants and lawyers are totally computer illiterate. They have miserably failed to adopt the vast array of modern technological facilities to improve their service or provide better living conditions, or to create new job opportunities.

### **Modernity and prosperity**

16. There is little doubt that with our literate and educated population, we are best placed of all the South Asian countries to benefit from the ‘Asian Miracle’. However, mediocre leaders and outdated ideologies are holding us back. We must sweep away all the hurdles that are holding us back. We must overhaul over system of governance and make it more accountable and transparent. We must sweep away feudal attitudes and practices. The president of the United States is usually addressed as Mr. President. It is the same in France and Russia. However, in Sri Lanka even the Ministers of the State address the Sri Lanka President

as ‘His Excellency’. Presidents, Ministers and members of Parliament are servants of the people and are maintained by taxpayers. There is no earthly reason why we should deify them or treat them like demi-gods. Such sycophantic practices are inimical to good governance because those who wield power often fall victims to the flattery of such sycophants and lose touch with the ordinary people who have elected them.

17. Good governance and transparency apart we have to modernise every aspect of our daily life. In a short letter of this nature I cannot detail all the measures we should adopt in order to modernise our society and utilise the full potential of the people. I could give a few examples of some of the steps we could adopt in order to meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For instance it is obvious that the modernisation of our system of education is long overdue. It is imperative that we must raise our standards so that our graduates are able to compete with those who pass out of the best universities in the world. Firstly, this would involve training all teachers in computer skills, teaching computer skills to all students beginning with nursery school children,<sup>8</sup> the establishment of computer centres in every rural school and making competency in IT skills a compulsory subject in all institutions of higher education. Secondly, we must ensure that every university graduate should have a high level of proficiency in at least one foreign language – either English, Chinese, Hindi, Spanish or Russian. Thirdly, we must rapidly expand the training and education of doctors, engineers, accountants, linguists etc so that in future we will

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8 It is an established fact that, in general, young children can learn computer skills faster than adults

send abroad highly skilled migrants and not housemaids. If a small country like Cuba could educate more than 5,000 medical students a year, it is difficult to see why Sri Lanka cannot educate even one fifth of that number. Similarly it is impossible for a society to be modernised without overhauling the legal system. Legal procedures should be changed to prevent interminable postponement of cases and the abuse of process involved in lawyers asking for dates at a drop of a hat or engaging in long and irrelevant cross-examination of witnesses. In criminal cases the procedure rules should be amended to compel the accused to specify the nature of his defence once he is in possession of the prosecution evidence. The police should be trained and equipped to adopt scientific methods of investigation rather than resorting to third degree interrogation, exacting 'confessions' under duress and staging false encounters leading to the death of suspects 'trying to escape' from police custody.

### **The need for a new movement**

18. All this, of course, means sweeping away the corrupt and inept political structures and building a new movement that could campaign for a better Sri Lanka and a better world. The leaders of yester years and the nationalists of all hues have failed to resolve any of the major issues facing our people. The ultra-nationalism and militarism of the LTTE was a costly and wasteful detour. In many ways the militarism of the LTTE had a negative impact on the struggle of the oppressed. It led to the enactment of draconian laws and imposition of massive restrictions on human and democratic rights. The LTTE and its backers erroneously believed that they were invincible and that the Sri Lankan army could

never defeat them.<sup>9</sup> The disastrous strategy of the LTTE not only disenfranchised and politically disarmed the Tamils but it also strengthened the chauvinist and obscurantist elements amongst the Sinhalese. They turned their guns not on the ruling class but ordinary working people. Equally, On the other hand, even after living through 30 years of ethnic conflict, the ruling elite has not recognised the need to take any meaningful and decisive steps to address the grievances of Tamils. Even today they offer only the same failed policy – i.e. placing total reliance on a few string-puppets who will dance to the tune of the southern ruling elite. That is their ‘home grown solution’. The APRC was mere eyewash designed to fool the naïve liberals. It is highly unlikely that the Rajapakse regime ever intended to offer anything other than the familiar ‘puppet show’ that we have witnessed since the days of the D.S.Senanayake regime.

## **We need a new movement**

19. We must break decisively with those failed policies of the LTTE as well as those of the Sri Lankan ruling elite. Instead we must build a new and a bold movement that could unite all those who have been exploited, disadvantaged and marginalized. Like the Suriya Mal Movement and the LSSP, which spearheaded the fight against caste oppression and British imperialism in the 1930’s, today we need a new movement to spearhead the struggle for modernity and to drag our country from the economic and political quagmire that the failed prophets of the yester years have led us into. Unfortunately, the LSSP lost its clout and its mass base by

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9 This myth was also peddled by the ‘peacenicks’ such as Jehan Perera and Kumar Rupasinghe, who consistently failed to condemn the human rights abuses of the LTTE.

entering into an opportunist alliance with the SLFP. We must learn the lessons of that debacle and make sure that the poor and the oppressed will always maintain its political and organisational independence. It is important to remember that nowhere in the world have the poor, the oppressed and the exploited ever won anything by begging, pleading and imploring the ruling elite to do the right thing. It is futile to ask the ruling class to serve the people, plead that they behave like gentlemen or appeal to their good sense. Those who advocate that we must appeal to the good sense of the ruling elite in order to protect the rights of the oppressed or the minorities are like good old village priests who preach morality to brothel keepers and implore that they give up their sinful habits and lead godly lives.<sup>10</sup> The poor, the oppressed and the minorities can win their rights only if they are able to build a strong and a united movement that can challenge the bankrupt politicians of yester years. We need not be intimidated or bedazzled by the power of the ruling elite. Even the most powerful men and governments on earth have been brought to their knees by the united action of the people. It is the disunity of the poor and the oppressed that creates the impression that the ruling elite is invincible. Time and again history has shown that the seemingly invincible and powerful rulers can be defeated when the people unite. Of course, the task of uniting the people is no easy undertaking. Although I cannot compel you to join me in this onerous task, I am hopeful that there will be many young men and women who will recognise the need to break with the backward and reactionary policies of past and dare to dream and have the courage to build a new society based on modernity, prosperity equality and justice.

The history of social progress in the world is the history of the struggle of the poor and the dispossessed for equality and justice. That is why, with Bob Marley, we must say in unison ‘Get up stand up, stand up for your rights, don’t give up the fight, stand up for your rights.’<sup>11</sup>

Yours affectionately,

### **Upali Cooray**

Podi Seeya (Grand Uncle)

14th July 2009

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11 This one of Bob Marley’s songs, which the Amnesty International has adopted as its anthem. The lyrics of this song are as follows:

***Get up, stand up: stand up for your rights! ////***

***Preacher man, don't tell me, Heaven is under the earth. I know you don't know  
What life is really worth.***

***It's not all that glitters is gold; 'Alf the story has never been told:***

***So now you see the light, eh!***

***Stand up for your rights. Come on!***

***Get up, stand up: stand up for your rights! //***

***Most people think,***

***Great God will come from the skies,***

***Take away everything And make everybody feel high.***

***But if you know what life is worth, You will look for yours on earth:***

***And now you see the light,***

# **Who promoted separatism in Sri Lanka**

**Reply to Channa (Comment 108)**

*By Upali Cooray*

1. **I** have been ill for a long time and I did not have the time or the inclination to read all the comments that had been made about the letter to my grandnephew. I am heartened by the fact that most people who read my letter – Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim have agreed with my sentiments. Therefore I see little need for a response. However there is one comment that I must deal with because it reveals the nature of people who espouses chauvinism. This is the comment by a gentleman called Channa on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2009.
2. I have always found that those who espouse chauvinist and ultranationalists are often mediocrities that do not know their facts. It is obvious that whatever methodology you employ, once you get your facts wrong, your analysis and conclusions cannot be correct.
3. Although I am not a member of the LSSP (I left the LSSP in

1964 when it decided to go into a coalition with the SLFP), it is important to point out that the accusation that it is the LSSP or socialist ideology that leads to fragmentation of Sri Lanka is a false and baseless charge. It is amusing that the LTTE too attacked the LSSP and the CP for supporting Sinhala supremacy and branded the left leaning EPRLF as Pallan Parayan party.

4. Lets look at the cold facts and see who was responsible for promoting ‘separatism’ and who stood firmly for national independence, unity and territorial integrity. Because of the constraints of space I can only give a few examples:
  - (a) In the period before and during the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war all the so-called Sinhala nationalists leaders did not demand independence from the British Raj. It is amusing to see the letters they wrote to their colonial masters pleading that their caste be given more privileges. The only political party that fought for total and unconditional independence from the British was the LSSP. For their forthright position the LSSP was banned and its leaders were arrested and jailed while the great Sinhala leaders collaborated with the imperialists.
  - (b) After the war they continued to kow tow to the British. Instead of developing the country they maintained a system that only favoured the elite. The Sinhala only Act was eyewash and a cheap gimmick to win votes and not an effort to help the majority of Sinhala people. This elite continued to send their children abroad to be educated in English. The LSSP warned the dangers of adopting the Sinhala only Act. Colvin R de Silva in

his famous speech indicated the danger by stating that **'you could have one language and two nations or two languages and one nation'**. The LSSP campaigned to have both languages as official languages. Interestingly enough one of the closest confidantes of President Mahinda Rajapakse, Mr. Dallas Alahapperuma, has recently agreed that Bandaranaike's move to make Sinhala only as the official language was a mistake and that President Rajapakse has remedied it. Thus it is not the LSSP that stoked the fires of separatism.

- (c) In 1978 the LTTE and other Tamil armed groups were small and ineffective. Most of them were treated as a joke. The best recruiting agent for the LTTE was J.R. Jayawardene. Contrary to Channa's false allegation Prabhakaran was never a leftist or an admirer of leftist ideology. Two erroneous policies were responsible for giving a boost to separatism. First was the campaign of pogroms beginning with 1977, 1981 and 1983. In particular after the pogrom of 1983 thousands of Tamil youth in Colombo flocked to join the armed struggle. The LTTE and other armed other groups had so many people volunteering to join the fight that they found it difficult to absorb them. The other blunder was the attempt to set up a US Base in Trincomalee. This alarmed the Indian government and to teach JR a lesson, the Indians armed and trained the LTTE and others. The LSSP and all other left groups opposed the pogroms and opposed the attempt to establish a Yankee base in Sri Lanka. I do not know where Channa was at the time of the 1983 pogrom. Many of us did our best to protect out Tamil brothers and demonstrate that ordinary Sinhala people do not support these mindless attacks on

ordinary Tamils living among us. I can remember the black Friday in July 1983. Few of us had gone to the GCSU Office to ring round people and see what can be done to stop these mindless attacks. The local Buddhist priests in Rajamalwatte were extremely helpful. When we returned to our home we saw a mob chasing a young Tamil. They were hysterical and wanted to tie him to a tree in our front garden and burn him alive. Against the advise of all the people around me I ran to the spot and asked the people to stop this madness. They began to shout at me. Fortunately for me a well-built young man who lived in the house opposite to ours, came out and asked the people to disperse. I had given him a helping hand a few days prior to this incident and he reciprocated by saving the life of this young Tamil, who turned out to be a young schoolboy. But there were many like Channa who was in that mob who wanted to kill and burn alive innocent Tamil people who had lived in the south all their lives. It is they who stoked the fires of separatism and not the LSSP.

- (d) After 1987 Indo-Lanka accords, a majority of Tamil groups agreed to accept the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment and work within a united Sri Lanka. The EPRLF won the North East Provincial Council elections but the Premadasa government refused to provide any funding. The Chief Minister of the NE Provincial Council met Premadasa on no less than 69 occasions and tried to get funds that had already been allocated to operate the Provincial Council. Instead Premadasa armed the LTTE and ordered the Indian troops out when it was on the verge of smashing the LTTE. The LSSP and other left groups

opposed this strategy. Premadasa gave separatism a new lease of life.

- (e) The final examples I would give is the role played by Ranil Wickremasinghe and the UNP government in 2001 to give unprecedented privileges to the LTTE under the so called Ceasefire agreement. It is not the LSSP that disclosed the names of security forces and supporters who organised undercover operations against the LTTE. It is not the LSSP that provided the LTTE with a powerful transmitters and freedom to roam around anywhere in the country. It is the very Sinhala leaders who lose no opportunity visit every Buddhist temple.
5. Thus the claim that the LSSP (or the socialists) promoted separatism is lie that chauvinists like Channa propagate in order to cover up their own role in creating the conditions for ethnic conflict and separatism. Socialists stand for greater unification and not break up of countries into small states. Sometimes non-socialists understand the importance of larger political entities. For instance Angarika Dharmapala believed that Sri Lanka should be a part of India. It is chauvinists like Channa who sow the seeds of discord and separatism.
6. I attack chauvinism because it is alien not only to socialism but it is also alien to our culture. Lord Buddha did not say '*Sinhala sathvayo niduk weva nirogi weva, suwapathweva*' (Sinhala beings should be free of misery, free of illness and be contented) he said "***Siyalu sathvayo niduk weva nirogi weva, suwapathweva***". He did not say that loving

compassion (Maitreya) should only extend to your relatives, friends, tribe or ethnic groups. So Channa is not only against socialism but is also against basic human and religious values that all great religious leaders have espoused. Her represents the barbarism or the Nazis and Fascists.

7. Finally, I am not sure whether Channa is your real name. If it is, it is unfortunate because the horseman and trusted Escort of Gautama Buddha was called Channa. In Sri Lanka ruled by Chauvinists neither Channa the horseman nor Gautama Buddha would be welcome because they are 'paradeskkarayas' ( Indian foreigners).

■ **Upali Cooray**

Remembering  
**Comrade Upali Cooray**  
By  
**The Friends**

**Upali Cooray:  
A Tribute From  
Canadians for Peace**

*by Ratnam Ganesh*

**M**r. Upali Cooray - Comrade Upali Cooray to the many who worked with him from the left of the political spectrum - relentlessly campaigned against all oppressions and abuse of power in Sri Lanka. He formed The Committee for Democracy and Justice in 1988 and worked with several political organisations and trade unions and defended democracy, justice and pluralism in Sri Lanka and outside.

In 1971-72, he toured Canada campaigning for the release of 80,000 political prisoners held in detention in the aftermath of the failed JVP insurrection of April 1971. Although he did not agree with the JVP's policies, he believed that every person is entitled to human and fundamental rights, regardless of his or

her political opinions and actions. He was arrested and detained by the police in Sri Lanka in 1972 for these activities.

It a similar brave and principled campaign by him and his colleagues in 1988-89 that helped Mahinda Rajapakse to present in foreign human rights fora the data on killings and disappearances during the Premadasa regime. This has deep lessons for sections of the present Sri Lankan government that claim that those presenting information abroad on rights abuses within Sri Lanka are traitors. Not so - they do it out of their love and affection for and commitment to the oppressed and their motherland.

Once again he visited Canada in November 2007 to campaign for peace and to end all forms of violence in Sri Lanka. He also campaigned for the human and democratic rights of people in the south such as the workers in Balangoda as a result of which he was arrested and detained for 6 months in 1984.

He was the Secretary of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign in the UK and campaigned against the Americans in Vietnam and Iraq, The list of his activities in support of human and democratic rights is too long to enumerate and detail.

With the demise of Upali Cooray, Sri Lankan Tamils lost one of their best and ablest friends among the Sinhalese people. Upali consistently stood with and supported the Tamils in their struggle for greater political autonomy. His pioneering activities, along with a few other dedicated and like-minded friends, helped to awaken the consciousness of all progressive Sinhalese on the plight of the Tamils who were subjected to various forms of discrimination at the hands of successive governments since 1948 when Ceylon gained independence from the British

colonial power.

Even after leaving Sri Lanka in the early 1980s Upali continued to defend vigorously the rights of the persecuted Tamil population and championed their right to be equal in all things at various forums in different countries. He continued to have dialogue with different Tamil parties in the hope of fostering strong links with the Sinhalese to enable all the communities to lead a peaceful coexistence in a united Sri Lanka and work together towards that noble end.

Unfortunately post-independence politics in Sri Lanka saw the emergence of parochialism and communalism as a significant trend. Few stood up against this or opposed it vehemently.

Upali certainly was one of those courageous few. He was unchanging in that he always stood for the weak and the oppressed - be it a JVP - er in prison or an oppressed Tamil. In spite of opposition to his ideas and schemes, he pressed on undaunted. His efforts cannot be assessed with any yardstick for they are immeasurable at this very critical period of Sri Lankan history.

Upali contracted an infection while he was on his way to Sri Lanka in May this year. He came back to the UK where after some tests doctors found that blood eating bacteria had entered his system and attacked his knee - Alfa Haemolytic Streptococcus Pneumonia. He recovered from this and continued to write his second letter to Pody seeya, the first having been well received in the press.

He was taken to the hospital on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August following breathing difficulties and succumbed the following day morning.

A cultured gentleman he was, and all those who came to know him also learnt to love and admire him. Now that Upali Cooray has left the scene of time, we can echo Leon Trotsky's words: it is victims who move humanity forward. All of us who worked with him - indeed all of us for whom he worked - mourn his death.

We salute our dear departed friend and mourn his demise, an especially unbearable loss to all those who want Sri Lanka to be a country of peace and freedom. Our thoughts are with his family and friends at this difficult time.

■ **Ratnam Ganesh**

# **A Tribute to Upali Cooray**

(1939-2009)

*By Ervin Charles Wesley*

**U**pali Cooray, a Sri Lankan Trotskyist and tireless social activist, died in London on August 21, 2009. He had just recovered from a dangerous Streptococcus Pneumonia infection but started to have difficulty breathing and was taken to the hospital on August 20. He died the next morning. He was cremated after a funeral service in London on September 3. His coffin was draped with a red flag bearing the hammer and sickle emblem.

Born in Sri Lanka in 1939, Upali joined the Youth League of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) while still a student. After completing his education he taught at Karandeniya Central School in Galle. In those days the LSSP was a mass-based Trotskyist party which fought hard against the anti-Tamil policies that were being fostered by the MEP coalition government, which had been swept into power in 1956 on the rising tide of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism.

Within a few years, however, the LSSP tired of swimming against the tide, and in 1964 a majority of the party voted to seek a coalition government with Mrs. Bandaranaike at the head. Upali supported the revolutionary Trotskyist faction of the LSSP, led by Edmund Samarakkody, Bala Tampoe, V. Karalasingham, and Meryl Fernando, which split and formed the LSSP (Revolutionary). Upali was elected to the central committee of the new party. But this group proved to be unstable, due to political differences, not to mention personal rivalries, among the leaders. The LSSP (Revolutionary) soon splintered.

Upali emigrated to Britain, entered the London School of Economics, and joined the International Marxist Group (IMG), the British Section of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International. He became secretary of Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. He eventually earned a BSc in Economics and LLB from the London University and MA in Business Law at London Guildhall University. He was called to the bar at Middle Temple in 1974.

In 1971 the radical Sinhalese JVP staged an ill-starred uprising against the coalition government. The LSSP and Communists supported the vicious police repression of the youth. Upali went on an international tour to campaign for the release of 80,000 political prisoners held in detention in the aftermath of the failed JVP insurrection of April 1971. He was arrested and detained by the police in Sri Lanka in 1972 for these activities.

In 1975 Upali returned to Sri Lanka and joined the Revolutionary Marxist Party, the Sri Lankan section of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, which was led by Bala Tampoe. He worked closely with leading activists of Tampoe's Ceylon Mercantile Union. In Colombo he established a legal practice

but devoted his services solely to trade unions and workers. Faced with the rising tide of Sinhalese chauvinism, Upali defended the principle of self-determination for the Tamil minority in the North and East of the island. In July 1979 he was a founding member of the Movement for Inter-racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE). He co-authored the first MIRJE publication, *Emergency '79*, which was the first publication to expose the atrocities in Jaffna that began on the first night of the Emergency rule.

In 1983, during the “**Black July**” pogrom against the Tamil people in the south, he courageously protected individual Tamils from attacks by Sinhalese thugs. When the Jayawardena government enacted repressive laws to crush the Tamil separatist movement and the trade unions, Upali actively defended the rights of the Tamil people and workers’ rights. He always fought the cases that others would not touch. He was known for defending the rights of workers, the poor, and the victimized in immigration, employment, criminal, housing, and family cases.

Upali also was an ardent champion of equal rights for women. He initiated alternative institutions to organise and educate women workers in the Katunayaka Free Trade Zone. He set up a Women’s Centre and a Legal Advice Centre and helped to publish 'Da Bindu' and 'Nirmani' to raise awareness of women’s issues. He set up a Resource Centre in Balangoda as a meeting place for tea plantation workers. For these activities he was jailed for six months. He also initiated Janahanda and Venasa, Sinhala language newspapers to counter capitalist media, war mongering and anti-Tamil propaganda in the Sinhala media. He wrote a series of booklets to explain legal jargon in simple language for the benefit of worker activists.

In the late 1980s Upali returned to Britain, where he continued to campaign against disappearances and assassinations during the reign of terror in Sri Lanka. In 1988 he formed the Committee for Democracy and Justice in Sri Lanka. He opposed both state-sponsored violence and the terrorism of the Liberation Tigers.

Upali looked for ways to build bridges to the splintered and marginalized remnants of the Old Left in Sri Lanka. He renewed his contacts with old comrades, including Edmund Samarakody, Hector Abhayavardhana, Osmund Jayaratne, Prins Rajasooriya, and N. Sanmugathasan. Upali thought the Left in Sri Lanka had reached a dead end and had to return to its roots. In an open letter to his grandson he wrote:

***“we must build a new and a bold movement that could unite all those who have been exploited, disadvantaged and marginalized. Like the Suriya Mal Movement and the LSSP, which spearheaded the fight against caste oppression and British imperialism in the 1930’s, today.***

***we need a new movement to spearhead the struggle for modernity and to drag our country from the economic and political quagmire that the failed prophets of the yester years have led us into. Unfortunately, the LSSP lost its clout and its mass base by entering into an opportunist alliance with the SLFP. We must learn the lessons of that debacle and make sure that the poor and the oppressed will always maintain its political and organizational independence.”***

■ **Ervin Charles Wesley**

Monday 21 September 2009

# **Remembering upali cooray:**

**From what might  
have been... to the hell we are in**

*By Rajan Philips*

**O**n Tuesday, August 25, I saw the email subject in the inbox: Upali Cooray – Funeral Arrangements. There is no dearth of death news in a given week, but this one - I was not expecting. I have not seen Upali in more than twenty years, but I can still picture the tall, robust frame that was Upali, remember his disciplined and healthy life style, and cannot come to terms that he could not have lived for at least 20 years past the biblical life span.

Even though we have not met in years and have corresponded or spoken on the phone only occasionally, I was aware of his presence through his activities and writings just as, I am sure, he was of mine. Last autumn when Tariq Ali delivered a lecture in Waterloo, Canada, where I live, I asked him during a private chat after the talk, if the name Upali Cooray rang a bell. “Of course”, came the reply and a broad smile, “and where is Upali now?” I said that he was still in London as we veered into talking about national questions in South Asia.

Many readers and internet loafers would be familiar with the wise old epistle that Upali publicly sent to his curious grand nephew explaining not only the history of the recent Sinhala-Tamil political relationship but also the outline of what needed to be done to address the grievances of the Tamil people. While there was nothing new in what Upali said, what was shockingly new was that a whole new generation of Sri Lankans has grown up in ignorance of our recent past and therefore lacking in the background to think clearly and constructively of ‘what is to be done?’.

Upali was the quintessential Leftist. He cut his political teeth in the Sama Samaja Party, but broke ranks as a young man when the Party by a majority vote decided to enter into a coalition with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party. Despite the severance, Upali was aware of and respected what the LSSP and its old leaders - NM, Colvin and Leslie - had stood for at great political and personal risks on the controversial issues of citizenship for the Tamil plantation workers and language rights of non-Sinhalese Sri Lankans. He was aware that the old Left Sinhalese had stood for programmatic devolution of power both as an extension of democracy and as a matrix to augment minority rights. He was aware that new Left Sinhalese have gone further and supported nothing less than the right of self determination for the Tamil people. More than being aware, Upali raised slogans, took to the streets, and stood up to state brutality in order to protect and enhance minority rights.

As his recent writings indicate, Sri Lanka missed out- on what might have been – by failing to support the ideas of equality and fairness that the old Left stood for, and it has no alternative but to adapt and adopt the same ideas if it is to get out of the hell into which our island has been plunged.

Upali was a principled and progressive champion of all oppressed sections society and his championing was not limited to familiar circumstances in Sri Lanka only but was his driving passion in England, where he studied, worked, married and eventually settled down. He was a friend of anyone whose rights were infringed – children, women, workers, queers, seniors, immigrants, and the list can go on. Once riding his motorcycle in Ratmalana, he saw a man beating up his wife on the road. He stopped the bike and scared the hell out of the bully until he promised that he would never abuse his wife again. Upali was the first male feminist I came across and I can say that he was a role model to other men in shedding the convenient shackles of patriarchy and male chauvinism.

Upali was more than a friend of the wronged and the oppressed for he could and did help those in need in his professional capacity as a barrister. In Colombo, he limited his legal service to trade unions and workers, representing them in labour tribunals against some big name employers and even bigger-name lawyers. Intelligent, articulate and witty, he was an unrepentant thorn on the backsides of some highly paid Colombo lawyers. Later, in England, he had taken not only to practicing law but also teaching it and making academic contributions.

I first saw Upali Cooray in July, 1979, at the YMCA auditorium in Colombo. It was the inaugural meeting of the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) and I was there as a member of the Provisional Committee and Secretary to-be. Upali was intervening in the discussion on the resolution condemning the State of Emergency that had just been declared. “A superb debator”, I told Dr. Chris Rodrigo, who was seated near me. “Upali is a great guy”, Chris, who had known Upali in England, replied. “You will find him great to work with”, he

went on and added that in London Upali was known for taking on racial police officers who were hard on immigrants.

Upali was great to work with. He was one of the moving spirits in MIRJE and was a key organizer of many of its activities. Upali was a co-author with Paul Caspersz and me of the first MIRJE publication, *Emergency'79*. It was also the first publication to deal with the human rights violations in Jaffna that began in 1979 and have not let up since. The monograph documented the results of the MIRJE fact finding mission comprising Paul Caspersz, Kumar David, Yohan Devananda, Jayaratne Malliyagoda and myself that went to Jaffna to investigate the deaths of six young Tamils who were taken out of their homes and murdered on the first night of the Emergency rule.

MIRJE also served an inadvertent nostalgic purpose by providing a friendly forum for all Left groups and leaders that came together in camaraderie and friendship despite their ideological differences to contribute to finding a solution to the national problem. The tent became even bigger with the formation of the Marx Centenary Committee in 1983 to commemorate Marx's death centenary. The Committee would meet at Hector Abhayavardhana's Chitra Lane study and Upali was a frequent visitor along with Edmund Samarakoddy, N. Sanmugathan, Osmund Jayaratne, Prins Rajasooriya - among others.

All hell broke loose in July 1983 and the lives of so many of us were irreversibly altered. Hopelessness and despair set in as years rolled by with no end in sight and those of us living abroad were getting reconciled to making fire on remembered wood.

A new ray of hope emerged with the election of Chandrika Kumaratunga as President. Upali had helped her restore her

shattered life to normalcy when she went to England after losing her husband to JVP madness. Many of us were delighted that Upali would be able to bring to bear on the new President some positive and progressive influence. That was a mistake - to assume that progressive friendships could prevail over reactionary politics. As President, Chandrika Kumaratunga is said to have reminded Vasudeva Nanayakara that unlike others the SLFP was not revolutionary party. Who said it was?

It was the extent of his disappointment with her that made Upali accuse the former President of political culpability in the assassination of Lakshman Kadirgamar by the LTTE. It was a stunning indictment that reminded me of Dr. Colvin's accusation of Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike over the police shooting of Peradeniya University student Weerasuriya in November, 1976. I did not quite agree with every argument Upali made in his hard hitting article but I appreciated his disappointment and anger.

Upali made the criticism, that many of have made repeatedly, that state and government leaders would hypocritically praise the likes of Lakshman Kadirgamar as national martyrs but will not do anything to implement even the most modest of their moderate policies to address the Tamil problem. It is hardly conceivable that Lakshman Kadirgamar or Ketish Loganathan would have condoned the forced encampment of over 250,000 displaced Tamils, or the treatment of the doctors who stood by the people to work in the war zone. No past Sinhalese national leader would have condoned police brutality that is becoming so rampant, extrajudicial killings, the death threats to critics and potential critics of the government, or the poisoning of young minds by asking them to write essays on the LTTE in a national exam.

Yet, we bear witness to such atrocities and more almost on a daily basis. And we have lost the one man whose rallying cry in the face of oppression and human rights violation was to organize and resist, gather more support and fight, and not to give up until the job is done. Even as we mourn his death, we cannot give up hope that we shall overcome, sooner than later. That would be the biggest political tribute we could ever pay to Upali Cooray.

■ **Rajan Philips**

# **A tribute to Comrade Upali Cooray**

*By Lionel Bopage*

**I** join with many comrades and friends, who are saddened by the passing away of Comrade Upali Cooray. He dedicated his life to the protection of human rights of the working people. He always persevered to preserve and enhance those rights against individuals, groups and parties that violated them. He always struck me as a simple man who was always politically conscious.

I first heard of Comrade Upali when I was behind bars in the seventies, convicted for conspiring and waging war against the Queen's government in Sri Lanka. Formerly, he was a member of the LSSP and left it in 1964 when its leadership decided to form a bourgeois coalition with the SLFP. Comrade Upali was an active member of the International Marxist Group in London and worked together with the comrades of the Ginipupura Group agitating for the release of the political prisoners.

My recollection is that he came back to Sri Lanka at the end

of the seventies and worked with Comrade Bala Tampoe as a member of the Revolutionary Marxist Party. He visited Comrade Rohana Wijeweera and me when we were in prison and later after our release. When I left the JVP in 1984, Comrade Upali with Comrades Gunasena Mahanama and Professor Sumanasiri Liyanage met me at the GCSU office in Colombo to discuss the political situation in the country.

I remember with pleasure his response to several comments made on Letter to a Grandnephew: Building a new society in Sri Lanka based on equality and justice, which expressed his genuine commitment for a fair, just and better Sri Lanka. A Sri Lanka where all its residents could take part and enjoy life as equals with dignity and security.

I admit I did not agree with some of the positions he took. Nevertheless, I never had any doubt that he meant well. For his intention, like all his social activism, was for achieving a just and lasting peace in the island.

I met him last when I was in London a few years back. We had a fruitful discussion about the ways to rid Sri Lanka of the terror being practised. We also discussed the political means on how to achieve a fair and just solution to the national question in Sri Lanka. He had been unwell for some time but this did not deter him from being engaged and active.

Even though we moved along different paths and followed different strategies we had the same cherished secular ideal of protecting and upholding the democratic rights of working people irrespective of their socio-cultural background.

As a fellow traveller on the path to social justice, I take this

opportunity to pay tribute and to un-categorically state, how much I and other activists on the road to justice and equity will miss Upali and his immeasurable contribution.

My heartfelt and deepest sympathy go out to his wife Sylvia and children Alex, Samantha and Jasmine, friends and loved ones. All I can say is that I share their grief. In the end keeping Comrade Upali's fight for justice, fairness, equity and democracy alive will be the best way to remember and honour him and his legacy.

■ **Lionel Bopage**

25 August 2009

# **His militancy had no match**

(Upali Cooray 17 September 1939 - 21 August 2009)

*By Engr. M. Sooriasegaram*

**U**pali Cooray was a friend and a comrade of mine for over 40 years. Our joint political work, mainly in the Asian Socialist Forum (ASF) in Britain, was between 1975 and 1985. I came into contact with Upali in the ASF, which I learned of through an advertisement in Time Out magazine. Our offices were at 22 Boundary Road in St. John's Wood. It was a squat to begin with, but later became short-lived community housing. I lived there for two years as a full time worker for ASF.

Although Upali and I had both been politically active in Ceylon/Sri Lanka in the 1960s, we did not know of each other then. I was a member of the Communist Party (CP) and after the Sino-Soviet split joined the pro-Peking wing ('Shan's group'). Upali was in the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and after it split in 1964, he joined the LSSP (Revolutionary), led by Bala Tampoe and Edmund Samarakkody - which was recognised by the Fourth International (FI) as its section.

Upali emigrated to the United Kingdom in the mid-1960s. Naturally he joined the British section of the FI – the International Marxist Group (IMG). He played an active role in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, which was led by the IMG. Much later he became politically distanced from the FI: which he charged with not seriously relating to revolutionary struggles in the Third World. He over-stated this in my view.

Whatever criticisms he may have had of the Trotskyism of the FI, he nevertheless remained an ardent Leninist and a fervent believer in the role of the ‘Vanguard Party’. Here I disagreed with him as I believe this doctrine gave rise to the bureaucratisation of Communist Parties, and the downfall of the Russian and Chinese revolutions. In Sri Lanka too, the Left parties became undemocratic, top down and anti-working class in the end. Upali initially opposed an initiative of Balasubramaniam and others in the ‘70s to found a workers’ cooperative (‘Infotec’) on the Mondragon model in the UK, for transplant to a future socialist Sri Lanka. In the 1990s, Upali admitted his mistake and wanted to popularise this experiment in Sri Lanka. By then it was too late, and we were too old.

In the Asian Socialist Forum, we concentrated our work on social revolutions in South Asia - mainly India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The idea was to create healthy revolutionary nuclei in these countries, independent of Stalinist ideologies: by engaging and wooing revolutionaries engaged in ultra-left adventurist struggles such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, the ‘Naxalites’ including the Charu Majumdar group in India, and other Maoists. In Sri Lanka we worked closely with Bala Tampoe’s Revolutionary Marxist Party (RMP), the Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU), and the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE).

To raise funds, the ASF catered at IMG conferences. We were invited by the FI section in France to do the same at its annual fête in Paris. We slaughtered 500 chickens each day to make curry. We made a handsome collection for our anti-racist work in Britain. Once on our way there we were confronted by the British Police at Dover. The Police Chief asked Upali, “What is your politics?”. Upali replied, “What is your politics? Are you a member of the National Front? Under what section of the law are you interrogating me?”, etc. The moment they knew he was a lawyer, they let us board the ferry. It was always enjoyable watching Upali’s class arrogance on display – sharp and powerful.

We literally worked day and night with total dedication. We held regular Marxist classes, including in my flat in Chiswick. Everybody took turns to lead this class. We became prolific readers in this period. This was the first time I read Trotsky’s writings, and works by Ernest Mandel, and was really gripped by them. We published a monthly bulletin in English with articles and pictures relating to struggles in the sub-continent and anti-racist struggles in the UK. The bulletin was fairly popular among the far left. We took up defence campaigns against the brutal treatment and killings of JVP militants and the indiscriminate mass killings of Sinhala youth by the government, even though we were very critical of the JVP’s politics. Bala Tampoe defended the JVP in the criminal courts, including its leader Rohana Wijeweera, without a fee. We published a booklet called *Island behind Bars*, sponsored by leading activists in Britain such as Bertrand Russell, Fenner Brockway, Tariq Ali and others.

We ran an active campaign for the release of political prisoners under Indira Gandhi’s ‘Emergency Rule’. Tens of thousands of railway workers were jailed for taking part in a strike. This was a

period of intense work on India. Tariq Ali spoke in many of our meetings and the atmosphere was electric. After training several Indian comrades we sent some of them to Bombay to set up nuclei revolutionary groups. Upali's thesis was that a revolutionary situation could be created in India through targeting three main industrial centres, namely Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. The idea was to organise the industrial workers in these cities for an eventual general strike to paralyse the Indian state. This was the task assigned to the comrades who were sent to India.

When the comrades predictably failed, they were severely and wrongly criticised by Upali. He was fixated by the LSSP's amazing and highly successful tactics during British colonial rule and in the 1953 Hartal. But Ceylon was not India, and India was not Ceylon. Bypassing the mass Communist Parties, the massive trade unions in India, and underestimating the power of the Indian bourgeoisie – the idea that a few young intelligent and committed comrades with little or no experience in mass struggles could organise a general strike in India with hundreds of millions of workers, was adventurism of the highest order.

Upali and I returned to Sri Lanka to work with the RMP and the CMU in the late '70s. We did some very good work there with the RMP, the CMU and comrade Pararajasingam in Jaffna. Bala Tampoe came up to address the Paranthan Chemicals workers, Pandatherupu weaving mill workers and so on. Upali contested the Dehiwela seat in the 1977 general election and lost his deposit. We did not contest to win but to highlight the dangers of JR Jayewardene's rise to power and the introduction of the executive presidency. 'JR' won the election in a landslide – with all Tamils in Colombo voting for him. CMU and RMP comrades organised defence committees for each street in Wellawatte to protect Tamil

families from United National Party thugs during the 1977 riots, following the elections.

Upali appeared in Labour Tribunals for CMU members. Once he was the defence lawyer for Union Carbide workers while Nadesan Satyendra represented management. Satyendra was on the side of the capitalist class, defending the same company which later poisoned and killed tens of thousands of people in Bhopal. Upali pulverised Satyendra and won a stunning victory for the workers. He had learnt the art of cross examination from Bala Tampoe.

In 1979, I returned to London to continue my work with the ASF. We did a lot of support work from London for Upali's political work with the RMP and the CMU. Upali remained in Sri Lanka but soon after he fell out with Tampoe and formed the Revolutionary Marxist Group, which later fizzled out. He was impatient and always wanted to fast-track "the revolution", ending with nothing. The 'general strike' and 'revolution' are notions of socialists not experienced in leading mass struggles. Tampoe was a seasoned and brilliant politician and trade union leader, who had lead and won many big struggles. He was the only remaining principled politician and trade union leader, respected by workers and intellectuals and minorities. He was the leader of the only remaining independent trade union. Certainly, Tampoe was a very difficult person to work with, as Upali often complained.

The ASF in the late '70s and early '80s shifted its emphasis to anti-racist work in Britain. This turned out to be an equally formidable task to making the revolution in South Asia. We were exposing racism within the police, within the Tory party, Labour party and generally within the British establishment. Syd Bidwell, Labour MP for Southall was a racist and his Labour Party office was

burnt down by Asian youth. When the 18-year old Gurdip Singh Chaggar was murdered in 1976, by white racists in Southall, it was the ASF that was first on the scene to find his body bleeding over a railing where he had been hung. We covered his body in a red cloth and called the ambulance. The police were complicit. They never rushed to such crime scenes. We held a protest meeting in a car park very near the spot, on the same day. A lot of Asian youth gathered there. Upali climbed on top of a parked car and used it as a platform to make a brilliant, emotive and rousing speech around which the Asian youth were mobilised. He convinced them that enough is enough and it was time to fight back. It is his political courage that I admired most in Upali.

We were the first in Britain to coin the slogan “Self Defence is No Offence!”, which sent shivers throughout the police and government circles. It actually meant that we form our own community police to defend ourselves, challenging the monopoly of the state police. Although it was only a slogan, the establishment became very concerned and increased its surveillance of us. All our names were in the police register. We did a lot of work in Southall during this period among the South Asian community. The conservative Indian Workers Association (IWA) also did not like our revolutionary stand. Later the Brixton and Tottenham uprisings took place. These shook the establishment, leading to commissions of inquiries. We challenged the National Front through our Bulletin and at public meetings, especially at National Union of Students (NUS) conferences and at Labour Party fringe meetings.

There was no end to the personal sacrifices we made, neglecting our professional development and families on the basis of “politics first”. This was unsustainable and one of the reasons we

were burnt out in the late eighties. Rather late in our lives, we returned to our respective professions. Upali began practising as a barrister only in the late '80s, having been called to the Bar in 1974. We had both understood a great deal about politics and life in the intervening decades.

■ **Engr. M. Sooriasegaram**

Jaffna-03.07.2019

**UPALI COORAY**  
[ 1939 - 2009 ]  
AND  
**SRI LANKA SOLIDARITY ACTIVISM**

*By B. Skanthakumar*

**U**pali Cooray, who passed away on 21 August 2009, was a revolutionary socialist; trade unionist; anti-racist; partisan of anti-colonial and national liberation movements; human rights lawyer; university teacher and much more.

Having moved to London in the late 1960s, he became a leading Sri Lanka solidarity activist, beginning with the campaign to free those jailed before and after the Sinhala youth uprising of 1971, and extending his support to the struggles of Tamil youth for self-determination before and after the 1983 'Black July' riots.

Here, I wish to recall his contribution to Sri Lanka solidarity activism in London, during and after the second *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)* insurrection of 1987-1991, which is when and where we first met.

In Sri Lanka, the United National Party regime presided by Ranasinghe Premadasa was in power and appeared unassailable. The parliamentary opposition was weak and divided, the mass media muzzled, dissent silenced by illegal arrests, abductions and extra-judicial killings, and emergency laws strangled civil society.

The self-acclaimed ‘patriots’ of the JVP were terrorising and assassinating public officials, politicians, trade unionists, and leftists supportive of the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord. Within a few short years, anywhere between 40 and 60 000 Sinhala youth were exterminated as ‘subversives’ by state security agencies, peaking at 1,000 a week in 1989.

Outside of Sri Lanka little was known, and even less understood, of this tragedy. At the time, international attention centred on the war that had raged since 1983 in the Tamil-majority North and East, and the military operations there of the misnamed *Indian Peace Keeping Force*.

Within the island, those who protested the bloodbath in the South were isolated and besieged: denounced as “terrorists” for inconveniently talking of democratic and human rights, and “traitors” for allegedly causing disrepute to the security forces through sharing information on human rights violations with *Amnesty International* among others.

A seasoned initiator of single-issue campaigns and broader coalitions, Upali Cooray spearheaded the establishment in London of the *Committee for Democracy and Justice in Sri Lanka* (CDJ) in 1989, joined by among others, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaranatunga who was then in self-exile following the JVP’s assassination of her husband Vijaya.

CDJ's demands were three-fold: justice for the families of the disappeared; protection of democratic rights whether violated by State or non-State actors; and resolution of the ethnic conflict through political and not military means.

It was a rare space where progressives, ethnic and ideological tensions notwithstanding, would meet, share information, debate and organise in solidarity with Sri Lanka. CDJ also hosted discussions with visiting Sri Lankan oppositionists, often at the Red Rose Labour Club in North London or Conway Hall in Central London.

In October 1990, Upali was instrumental in organising a fact-finding delegation of European parliamentarians and lawyers led by Christine Oddy MEP to Sri Lanka.

The delegation met and were briefed by, among many others, the opposition politicians Mahinda Rajapakse MP and Mangala Samaraweera MP who were de-facto leaders of the *Mothers Front*, an association of family members of the 'disappeared'.

The mission report, along with the names and details of almost 1,500 victims and an analysis of their cases, was published in London in September 1991 by *Friends of the Disappeared in Sri Lanka*, another organisation inspired by Upali.

Shortly before its publication, Mahinda Rajapakse - bound for Geneva to attend the UN Sub-Commission on Human Rights - had been detained at the international airport, and affidavits on 'disappearances' collected by the *Mothers Front* confiscated from him.

That incident underscored the value of this documentation and

the importance of its dissemination. Upali was clear-headed on the nature and limits of the European Parliament and the United Nations; however he was looking beyond them, hoping that the report's publication would ***“encourage more people to support the efforts of the courageous few men and women in Sri Lanka who continue to fight for human rights ...”***

Another important initiative of his was the London conference on ‘Human and Democratic Rights in Sri Lanka’ organised by CDJ in November 1993. This large meeting at the University of London Students Union brought together activists from Sri Lanka, with exiles and expatriates from across Western Europe.

Among the speakers from Sri Lanka were Kamala Peiris, Lucien Rajakarunanayake, Ainsley Samarajeeva, Joe William and Javid Yusuf. Presentations were invited on child rights, labour rights, media freedom, constitutional reform, peace initiatives, and security sector reform, and later edited by Upali and published as *In Place of the Spiral of Violence (London, 1994)*.

As Upali observed in the introduction to that collection: discussions on democratic and human rights inside and outside Sri Lanka were polarised on ethnic lines, and had evacuated the concerns of marginalised groups and classes. Only an all-island mass democratic movement would, he argued, “end the spiral of violence that has plagued our country”.

Two dissenting Tamil participants at the conference were subsequently murdered by the *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam*, exercising its self-elected role as “sole, legitimate representatives of the Tamil people”: Sabaratnam Sabalingam in his Paris apartment in May 1994, and Loganathan Ketheeswaran (as he then preferred) at his Dehiwela home in August 2006.

When we last met in Colombo in April, it was evident that after 26 years of brutality and suffering visited on Sri Lanka and its peoples, the war was in endgame. Upali was already thinking ahead of the democratic tasks unfinished, the fight for justice and social transformation shelved for a generation, and the patient renewal of the Left beginning from basic political education of the youth. His restless spirit and sharp intellect will be missed in these endeavours.

■ **B. Skanthakumar**

Colombo-23 October 2009

## Comrade Upali s' Famous Song by Bob Marley

Get up, stand up, stand up for  
your rights!

Get up, stand up, stand up for your  
rights!

Get up, stand up, stand up for your  
rights!

Get up, stand up, don't give up the  
fight!

Preacher man, don't tell me  
Heaven is under the earth  
I know you don't know  
What life is really worth  
It's not all that glitters is gold  
'Alf the story has never been told  
So now you see the light, eh!  
Stand up for your rights. Come on!

Get up, stand up!  
Stand up for your rights!  
Don't give up the fight!

Most people think  
Great God will come from the skies  
Take away everything  
And make everybody feel high  
But if you know what life is worth  
You will look for yours on earth  
And now you see the light,

You stand up for your rights!

Get up, stand up!  
Stand up for your rights!  
Don't give up the fight!

Life is your right!  
Get up, stand up! So we can't give up  
the fight!  
Stand up for your rights! Lord, Lord!  
Get up, stand up! Keep on struggling  
on!  
Don't give up the fight!

We're sick and tired of your ism and  
schism game  
Die and go to heaven in Jesus' name,  
Lord  
We know and we understand  
Almighty God is a living man  
You can fool some people sometimes  
But you can't fool all the people all  
the time  
So now we see the light

Get up, stand up!  
Stand up for your rights!  
Don't give up the fight!