

BOOK REVIEW

The Rise of the Labor Movement in Ceylon by V. K. Jayawardena, Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 1972, xvi+382pp.

I

Though the title of this study concerns the labor movement, the author's concern is not limited to a narrow sense of the labor movement, but includes a broad concept combining labor with the Buddhist religion revival and growing nationalism. The interrelationship among labor, religion, and politics is analyzed vividly from the viewpoint of the radical middle class with much sympathy toward the oppressed working class in urban areas. The author chiefly focuses on the labor movement leadership taken by the radical group of the middle class in the social and political context of the plantation economy and the constitutional development for self-government.

The book consists of two parts: labor, religion, and incipient nationalism 1880-1915; and labor and nationalist politics, 1915-33. The religious implications of national awakening are examined among urban workers as an initial stage of the labor movement in Part I. The author's opinion that revolts against imperialism began under the guise of religious movements is likely to arouse much interest among historians in the other parts of Asia and may suggest a comparative study of cases like the Taiping rebellion in China and the 1857 Rebellion of India. Part II deals with the years when the political and labor movements became organized, and the link between politics and religion loosened as the nationalists no longer found it necessary to use religious symbols to express political grievances.

Dr. Jayawardena claims that the communal riots of 1915 can be taken as a useful dividing line in Ceylon's modern history. In 1966 Dr. E.F.C. Ludowyk had treated the history of the first two decades of the twentieth century in Ceylon as little more than a record of the decorous movement for constitutional reform.¹ Only the recent studies of Dr. Jayawardena and Dr. P.T.M. Fernando have revealed the significance of the 1915 riots in the modern history of Ceylon since the opening of the Colonial Office records for the period has made feasible a reexamination of the riots and a reassessment of their causes and consequences.² In this sense the present study represents a major effort at a fresh probing of the periodization in the modern history of Ceylon.

Owing to the long history of colonial rule in this island successively by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, the formation of indigenous elites has centered around the minor positions in the colonial administration and the business related with the plantation industries, which still play a decisive role in the social and economic life of independent Sri Lanka. The Ceylonese elites (generally described as middle class) in the

¹ E.F.C. Ludowyk, *The Modern History of Ceylon* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966).

² See P.T.M. Fernando, "The British Raj and the 1915 Communal Riots in Ceylon," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 245-55, and a symposium "The 1915 Riots in Ceylon," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 by R. N. Kearney, K. Jayawardena, C. S. Blackton, and P.T.M. Fernando.

days of this study were composed of agricultural landowners, coconut and rubber planters, merchants, small industrialists, professional men, and others whose claims to "high status" in society were based on property ownership, caste occupation, education, or combinations of these factors. The way of life among the middle class has been enormously Westernized in consequence of this process, clearly separating its members from the rest of the Ceylonese people. One crucial feature of this life style is the use of English as a major home language and as the language of the elites when they interact among themselves. Symbolically, they are called *kalisam-karayo* ("men with a pair of trousers") in Sinhala language by non-elite Sinhalese who wear sarongs.

The author divides the people of this category into two sections. One is a traditional middle class who held positions of influence in the non-urban areas for the most parts. The other is a modern middle class composed of a multi-racial group of persons educated in English, who have not merely assumed an English style of life in terms of dress, names, and habits, but have also adopted prevalent British social and political attitudes. This section of the middle class is again classified into three subsections, "conservatives," "moderates," and "radicals." While conservatives are supposed to have been the local spokesmen of the imperial power, the moderates and the radicals were politically and economically more nationalistic Ceylonese. The differences of opinion among these three subsections were fairly sharp in the sphere of social and political issues. The leaders of the labor movement were the radicals, who presented a new approach to problems of poverty, and who advocated trade unionism as a method of obtaining improved economic conditions for the workers. The significance of the leadership taken by the radical elites for the development of the labor movement is the *leitmotif* in this study.

II

One of the interesting historiographical techniques which enliven this study with vigor is description of the various incidents through the personal character, opinions, and activities of the leaders of trade unions, rather than by the chronological arrangement of impersonal historical facts. Leading figures in the labor movement were also very active in the political, religious, and cultural life of the age, motivated by the enlightened ideas developed chiefly under the influence of the liberalist and socialist movements in England. This is one of the ways in which a well-planned study of an unwritten part of modern history has contributed immensely to the interrelated aspects of the elites society in Ceylon.

The first person to introduce ideas of trade unionism into Ceylon was A. E. Buultjens, whose career showed the influences of both a liberal education in Cambridge and the Buddhist revival by Theosophists, although he had come from a very small Christian community of European and Ceylonese extraction. The second was P.M.L. Pinto, who was a Goan (of Portuguese-Indian descent—one of the smallest minorities in Ceylon) qualified as a doctor in Bombay. The earliest labor dispute surveyed in the book was the strike of printers of Colombo in 1893. This strike, which had the elements of a modern industrial dispute, was the outcome of the propaganda carried on by Buultjens and Pinto, according to the author.

One remarkable feature in the early stage of the labor movement which should fascinate the intellectual curiosity of readers is the strike of laundry workers in 1896 that lasted for three weeks without the outside leaders who participated in other strikes

of Colombo workers in the same period. This militant united action of laundrymen was organized on the basis of caste solidarity, since laundry work was a caste monopoly with very little possibility of getting local replacement. However, the author does not attempt to analyze in detail nor to evaluate the positive aspect of caste unity as an element of autonomy and resistance. On the contrary, the author's concern tends to emphasize the important roles played by the middle class leaders who initiated and organized the British style of labor movement while being the educated outsiders.

The third leader in the pre-riot period was J. Kotelawala, who had been a police inspector and later was very active in the temperance campaign as a member of the Rationalist Association of England. During the strike of carters of Colombo in 1906, he assumed the leadership of the Carters' Union and fed all the carters and their bulls, who crowded into his front garden. And the roles of E. Jayawardena, H. V. Cuylenburg, A.J.R. de Soysa, A. Dharmapala, and W. Harischandra are described in the chapter on the railway strike of 1912. The author notes that the first workers' leaders had emerged from the working class itself during this strike. But a detailed account about the type of persons who led the strike is not included in the present work although she has written an article on this subject utilizing the same source material.³

The trade union leadership in the post-riot period is mostly represented by the great boss, A. E. Goonesinha, who came to the labor movement through his involvement in religious and political issues under the combined influence of the Buddhist revival and Western radical thought. The author calls the period dealt with in the second part of her study the Goonesinha era. Thus, this book can be read as an intellectual history in the context of the interrelationship between religion, politics, and the labor movement.

III

The author accentuates the influence of the modernization and industrial growth of Japan, with special reference to the atmosphere of excitement created by the result of the Russo-Japanese war, on the growth of militant Ceylonese labor activity at the start of the present century.

In Ceylon, the course of the Russo-Japanese war was featured almost daily in the local papers and the Japanese triumph was acclaimed by the nationalists, the Buddhists, and the urban workers. To the politically conscious, it represented the victory of Asian nationalism over European aggression. Commenting on the significance of the Japanese war, a Ceylon journal wrote, "Japan has been the inspirer of the nations of Asia. It was her victories in the war more than anything else that gave courage and confidence to the aspirations of the peoples outside Europe." A Ceylonese nationalist, Victor Corea, expressed his admiration for the Japanese victory in a lecture "East and West," where he said, "The debt that Asia owes to Japan can never be repaid! Had she failed in her struggle with Russia, we Asiatics would have had to remain grovelling at the feet of Europeans as mere hewers of wood and drawers of water for centuries to come."

The Buddhist public of Ceylon also showed great enthusiasm over the Japanese victory over Russia, which was hailed as a triumph of a Buddhist country over a Christian power, and one of the active Buddhist and temperance leaders, A. A. Kuruppu, inaugurated a fund to help the Japanese. (pp. 118-19)

³ V. K. Jayawardena, "Pioneer Rebels among the Colombo Working Class," *Young Socialist*, Vol. 4, No. 3.

These remarkable passages may remind readers, particularly those in Japan, to reflect gravely on the modern history of Japan in the context of the relationship with Asian countries. J. Kotelawala, a leader of the labor movement at the time of this war, who had a great admiration for the Japanese, formed the Ceylon Japan Trading Company to promote trade with Japan. Admiration of, and expectations of Japan were not limited to the middle class. Dr. Jayawardena gauges the great enthusiasm among the urban working class from the thriving trade in war pictures.

In the same year when the nationalist leaders in Ceylon were making efforts to help Japan, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 was renewed with fresh stipulations concerning the Indian possessions of the United Kingdom. The new agreement of 1905 was added with the object of maintaining "the territorial rights of the High Contracting Parties in the regions of Eastern Asia and of India, and the defence of their special interests in the said regions." Article IV of the agreement stated that "Great Britain having a special interest in all that concerns the security of the Indian frontier, Japan recognizes her right to take such measures in the proximity of that frontier as she may find necessary for safeguarding her Indian possessions." Thus, the impression of a Ceylonese in those days that Japan had subdued the most powerful of European nations by her superior morality might have been absolutely illusion. These historical facts should not be easily forgotten by the people of Japan if, as a fellow Asian country not as a big power, they wish to improve relations with the South Asian nations.

IV

This book is mostly confined to the labor movement of the urban working class led by the middle class of the capital, except for Chapter 13 which deals with the movement in the plantation sector. Life in Colombo, like other big cities in Asia, has been quite different from that in the rest of the country. Even nowadays, to live and work in Colombo is the major concern of almost all Ceylonese middle class, from the conservatives to the radicals. The process of the social isolation of the middle class from the mass of the people was the immediate consequence of their geographical isolation in Colombo and a few other towns. The chapter on the plantation labor movement, which is isolated from the rest of the chapters, also reminds a reader of the isolated position of the estate workers in the society. The movement of agricultural laborers in the village areas is completely ignored in this book though their numbers are much larger than urban laborers. It is to be hoped that this part of the history will soon be supplemented.

This book is based on elaborate study, using original source material in the Ceylon National Archives and government departments in Ceylon, and unpublished official documents in London. Most of these historical materials were written in English which was not the language of the working class. Although she recognizes the increase of Sinhala papers at the beginning of the twentieth century (p. 134), the author did not utilize them as sources but depended on the works in English. It is quite natural that most written sources have come from the middle class since workers were not in a position to express themselves in written form. However, there must be a way to dig out, and listen to, the voices of the oppressed people, which are not to be found in written documents in archives. Perhaps, oral evidence of aged workers' experiences could provide one solution.

The need to learn the lessons of the historical development of their labor movement, as revealed in this laborious study, is undoubtedly essential for the working class of Ceylon. Unfortunately, no good reference book in Sinhala nor Tamil on the history of the labor movement has been written yet. It is somewhat unfair that foreign readers like us are able to benefit from this book, while the price of the English edition may not be within the reach of a student or family of the working class in Ceylon. It is sincerely hoped that a vernacular translation will be printed in a cheaper edition as soon as possible.

(Hisashi Nakamura)