

சண்முகதாசன் நூற்றாண்டு மனப்பதிவு



இலங்கையின் புரட்சிகர கம்யூனிஸ்ட் இயக்கத்தின்
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நூற்றாண்டு
மனப்பதிவு



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Preface

July 3, 2020 was the birth centenary of Nagaligam Shanmugathasan (Shan), who was a pioneering leader of Sri Lanka's revolutionary communist movement, an outstanding Marxist theoretician and a frontline trade unionist. This book is a collection of articles by political analysts recalling their memories of his political life.

All except one of the articles were originally written in English and most of them were published in The Sunday Island. Later, they also appeared on various websites. Tamil translations of these articles were published in Thinakural and Virakesari.

All but one of the writers did not ever identify themselves with the Communist Party led by comrade Shan or with his political activities. However, the enthusiasm shown by these individuals in writing about the politics and the outstanding qualities of Shan, who belonged to an earlier era, helps to make the present generations, that do not know him, aware of his greatness. For that reason, the Shanmugathasan Centre for Marxist Studies has brought together these articles, which have certain distinct value, as a Shan centenary volume.

We sincerely thank the authors of the articles, the comrades in the diaspora for their financial contributions to enable the publication of this volume, and Ganeshalingan Kumaran for designing and printing it as a handy book of high quality. We believe that this book will be useful to persons belonging to the current generation and to future students of politics interested in studying the history of Sri Lanka's left movement – the communist movement in particular.

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Comrade Shan

*Remembering N. Sanmugathasan
On His Birth Centenary (July 3rd 2020)*

- Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka -

A political personality must be judged against the backdrop of his/her own time but also viewed with the benefit of hindsight so as to ascertain the more lasting relevance of his/her effort. So it is with Nagalingam Sanmugathasan, better known as N. Sanmugathasan and best known as “Comrade Shan”, the centenary of whose birth falls of July 3rd 2020.

To reverse the usual sequence, let us begin with the time we are living in. Noam Chomsky, the world’s most prominent and influential public intellectual said in a widely quoted recent interview that we are approaching the most dangerous point in human history” He followed it up in a more recent interview on the current wave of protests in the USA saying “The first thing that comes to mind is the absolutely unprecedented scope and scale of participation, engagement, and public support. If you look at polls, it’s astonishing. The public support both for Black Lives Matter and the protests is well beyond what it was, say, for Martin Luther King at the peak of his popularity, at the time of the “I Have a Dream” speech.” (Jacobin magazine June 2020)

In order to understand the historical roots of the strong protest movement –which surveys show has 61% of white participants, though the Black Lives matter movement is the core-- the US media has begun to seek out figures from the old Black Panther Party (BPP). Counterpunch magazine recently interviewed Billy X Jennings, Black Panther Party veteran, aide to Huey P Newton, pall-bear-

er of George Jackson, and BPP archivist, on the subject of the recent protests. In answer to a question he replied: “I would take this back to some learning. When I first joined the BPP I read a book called Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung. Mao said that at some point “a single spark can start a prairie fire”. We are seeing the spark in the streets since Floyd’s murder...”

Mao Zedong was a titan of 20th century history and one of the most consequential history-makers of modern times. He was a great ideological, intellectual and philosophical influence on several generations. Even today, the leading French philosopher Alain Badiou regards himself a Maoist.

The wave of protests in the USA and the world today, though dissimilar from the great wave of 1968 in that the portraits of Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong are absent, are validations of Mao in the animating spirit of the young people in those protests, because one of Mao’s best known slogans (which he thought summed up ‘the essence of Marxism’) was “It is Right to Rebel!”

Comrade Shan knew Mao and represented him. He was the only Sri Lankan and one of the very few South Asians to have had conversations with him. The founder-leader of India’s Maoist movement the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) much better known as the Naxalites, Charu Mazumdar, never met Mao. Shan, however, stood with Mao at Tien An Men square at the height of the Cultural Revolution when Mao reviewed one and half million Red Guards marching as the sun rose.

Shan’s Maoist party, the Ceylon Communist Party, was one of the two pathways for serious-minded revolutionaries in Sri Lanka, the other being the ‘Southern’ stream of the pro-Moscow Communist party of Sri Lanka (CPSL), identifying themselves with Dr. SA Wickremesinghe. In actuality these tended to be a single path, not two, since many of the Lankan Maoists originated in the ‘Southernist’ SA Wickremesinghe tendency of the CPSL.

Shan may be seen as the founder and ‘Vice-Chancellor’ of the ‘university’ of Marxist-Leninist learning that almost every committed Lankan revolutionary, South and North graduated from but never stayed on in. The fact that the JVP, though not itself a Maoist movement emerged from the bowels of the Maoist movement and its leading cadres were for the most part ex-Maoists, is evidence of the fecundity of Sri Lankan Maoism.

When the Maoists split from the pro-Soviet communist party in 1964, the new movement was distinguished by the fact that it had been able to carry the main trade unions of the pro-Moscow party (the Ceylon Trade Union Federation—CTUF) with it, which was a rarity in most parts of the world. The CTUF was led by Sanmugathan. The cadre leading the All Lanka Peasants’ Congress also went along with Sanmugathan.

Most striking was the ideological role played by the Sri Lankan Maoist leader internationally. Shan was one of the first in the world to found a Maoist communist party, breaking away from the Moscow-centric CP. His skills with the English language and his knowledge of Marxist-Leninist doctrine made him an ideal representative for the Communist Party of China in the global polemic with the pro-Moscow parties. The histories and anthologies of political literature of that period showed the Ceylon Communist Party, as the Maoists were known, the chance to punch above their weight. His English-language writings were regarded as a prime source on Maoism by students of comparative communist studies the world over.

Within Sri Lanka though, Shan’s chances of success were almost non-existent. He was from the Tamil minority, an elderly man, with a bad back and an upper middle-class lifestyle --and therefore capable of neither organic integration with the increasingly monolingual Sinhalese social base nor the practice of what he preached.

Shan’s indirect influence was very considerable though, in that Mao’s works were translated into Sinhala and had an ideological

shaping influence far beyond the membership of his party (for instance, the spirited current Chairman of the Election Commissioner was a Maoist when he was my senior at Peradeniya—while he recalls me as a ‘Stalinist’).

When the April 1971 insurrection broke out, Sanmugathasan who had been one of the most acerbic ideological critics of the JVP was jailed along with them by Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike, to whom all revolutionaries looked and sounded alike.

Some of Shan’s best writing was in prison and published as books after his release. When he was released from jail, his party had split, with a faction adopting the new foreign policy of China, best exemplified by its line on Sri Lanka and Sudan where it supported governmental suppression of communists and radical leftists it suspected were under the influence of the USSR. This rightward shift in China’s foreign policy was the cause and consequence of its new rapprochement with the United States under Richard Nixon.

Sanmugathasan was not entirely and utterly orphaned, though. Having opposed Deng Xiaoping’s alleged restoration of capitalism in China and supported Albania, he broke with it too and guided his vastly diminished party into the Revolutionary International Movement (RIM), which confederated far-left Maoist insurgencies in Asia, including the Naxalites of India and most importantly, the successful Maoists of Nepal.

From a discussion in December 1983 with Kothandaraman, a respected senior figure in Indian Maoism and deputy leader of the underground Peoples War Group of the Naxalite movement, I knew the impact that Shan had on subcontinental Maoism and the regard in which he was held.

In the late 1960s, the Jaffna branch of Shan’s Maoist party, then in its heyday, had led a violent mass struggle, prefiguring those of today’s Naxalites in India against caste oppression in the mainly Tamil North. Though this struggle was displaced by the emerging

Tamil secessionist movement, the left wing of that movement had been influenced by and had considerable respect for the struggle waged by the Maoists. When K. Pathmanabha, founder-leader of the EPRLF, wasn't musing about the failing health of Dr. George Habash, iconic leader of the Palestinian Left movement, the PFLP (which Pathmanabha had trained with), he was asking me with concern "how is Comrade Shan?"

However, despite the invocation of the slogan of a national liberation struggle and the arguable approximation of the conditions in the Tamil areas to those that Asian Maoism took root in, and despite the Tamil ethnicity of the founding father of Lankan Maoism, none of the Tamil Eelam armed movements were Maoists except for a small, short lived group called the National Liberation Front of Tamil Eelam (NLFT) which soon spawned a breakaway, the People's Liberation Front of Tamil Eelam (PLFT).

The abiding irony of history, though, is the poignant relevance of the essays written by Sanmugathan in the mid-1980s (and published in the Lanka Guardian), reminding the emergent Tamil armed movement, of Mao's Rules of Discipline and Points for Attention, cautioning the young militants against terrorism and killing of civilians, and preaching the doctrine of Protracted People's War in which, mass organizations form the foundation and politics in command ('all political power flows from the barrel of the gun but the party commands the gun and not the gun the party' - Mao).

Had Velupillai Prabhakaran heeded this advice of an older Tamil leader and guru who had dialogued with, learned from and literally stood alongside Mao, the greatest theorist and practitioner of guerrilla warfare in history, he and his militia may not have been obliterated on the banks of the Nandikadal lagoon.

Shan and my father, Mervyn de Silva (whose 21st death anniversary fell last week), were friends. Mervyn had fondly nicknamed him 'Mao Tse-Shan'. He used to visit our rented flat in Ward Place and Mervyn would drop in for a meal at Shan's home down Schofield Place. My father and he would discuss and debate Chinese

foreign policy, domestic politics and inner-party dynamics in depth. When Mervyn edited the Ceylon Daily News, Sunday Observer, The Times and the Lanka Guardian, he never failed to publish Shan, much to the slightly bemused chagrin of his friend Pieter Keuneman, the cosmopolitan leader of the much larger, mainstream, pro-Moscow communist party.

I had read Mao as I barely entered my teens, thanks to Comrade Shan. When he returned from China, he used to bring me, a school-boy, lacquered bamboo Mao badges, tunics, and various editions of the Little Red Book of 'The Thoughts of Mao' and of Mao's poems.

When I was a young man in the 1980s acting on Mao's moral-philosophical warrant that "it is right to rebel!" and trying to survive for the rest of the decade "all the vicissitudes of this dangerous business" of "risking one's skin to prove one's platitudes" (Che Guevara), comrade Shan afforded me shelter for some weeks, which could have proved painfully costly for him at the hands of the state, and terminally so at the hands of the JVP which had already murdered old Left veterans like trade union leader LW Panditha.

On this his birth centenary, my indelible memory from a late-night conversation is of him confessing that "In matters of ideology, I am a Brahmin."

Sunday Island

05 July 2020

On Being A Tamil, Sri Lankan & Marxist Internationalist

*The Relevance of
N. Sanmugathasan to Our Times & All Times*

- Rajan Philips -

It was gratifying to see Dayan Jayatileka lead off the birth centennial tributes to N. Sanmugathasan (Shan) in Colombo Telegraph two weeks ago. Last Sunday, Editor Manik de Silva added his reminiscences of Shan from his unique vantage point as the doyen of Sri Lankan journalism in the English language. There have been other tributes – by V. Thanabalasingham and DBS Jeyaraj, and likely many more especially in Tamil which I have not seen. Ravi Vaithees has previously provided scholarly accounts of Shan's politics in the context of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka.

I would like to use the privilege of my space today to offer some reflections on what Shan's life and times could teach us on the fundamental questions of life and politics which all of us muddle through and many of us are affected by, but to which no one can provide easy answers that would be conclusive and acceptable to everyone. What does it mean to be a Sinhalese, a Tamil, or a Muslim in Sri Lanka? Who is the Sri Lankan in Sri Lanka? And in these tragicomic times, when Trump's America steals the show for all the wrong reasons, what is it to be a Sri Lankan in the US, other Western countries, or anywhere else in this globalized world?

Shan and his politics which were in the national limelight in the 1960s and 1970s might be unfamiliar territory to the majority of Sri Lankans who are under fifty years of age. Those who are familiar with the politics of that era and Shan's role in it are likely in

their seventies, or well into their sixties. The 1950s, the first decade after independence, began with the death of one Prime Minister (DS Senanayake) and ended with the assassination of another (SWRD Bandaranaike). In between, there was the Great Hartal of 1953, a tumultuous change in government in 1956, the Galle Face Satyagraha that same year, the first communal riots after independence in 1958, and all of them interspersed with militant labour strikes. There were two political dynamics at work.

The two dynamics

The first involved the political relationship between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, the flashpoint of which was the Sinhala Only legislation that made Sinhala the country's only official language. The Muslims were not as aggravated, and they were geographically divided between the southern Sinhalese political parties and the Federal Party that was electorally dominant in the northern and eastern provinces. The parties of the Left, the LSSP and the Communist Party, lambasted both the Sinhalese and the Tamil political parties as right-wing communal parties (or communalistic – to use Mahinda Rajapaksa's recent adjectival preference), advocated parity of official language status for both the Sinhala and Tamil languages, and projected a political program for the emancipation of the oppressed classes of all communities. The program was unequivocally predicated on class politics and working class leadership, but within (the LSSP's and the CP's) contending applications of the Marxist framework to local and global political realities. The Left-Right ideological contestation was the second political dynamic.

The 1960s saw the interplay of the two dynamics and the realignment of political forces that shaped the course of politics for the rest of the century and even beyond. The first realignment came about, in 1964, as a coalition between the centrist SLFP and the Left Parties, that led to splits within the two Left parties and disillusionment among left-oriented Sinhala youth. The second realignment was the 1965 alliance between the right-wing UNP and the Tamil

Federal Party, which too led to disillusionment among the Tamil youth. There were no apparent signs of what these realignments would eventually lead to, but it is reasonable to say that at the political level the seeds of the JVP insurrection in 1971 and the Tamil separatist movement after 1972 can be traced to the twin disillusionments of the mid 1960s.

The 1960s were also the decade in which Sanmugathasan gained national prominence as a political leader. He was already a leading member of the Communist Party, having started his political activism as a university undergraduate, joining the trade union movement straight after university, and becoming the head of the Ceylon Trade Union Federation in 1947, when he was just 27 years old. Remarkably, Shan's split with the Communist Party was not the result of coalition politics. He was expelled from the Communist Party, almost a year earlier, in 1963, for taking a pro-Maoist line. There may have been other internal reasons and personality clashes may have been at play, but the growing Sino-Soviet schism provided the reason for (what was then) the Ceylon Communist Party to expel one of its frontline leaders. The reasons for his expulsion are irrelevant now. What Shan did politically after his expulsion is what has earned him a special place in the history of Left politics and in the history of Tamil society in Sri Lanka.

Expelled from the Ceylon Communist Party, Shan founded the Ceylon Communist Party (Peking Wing), forcing the parent party to be named by the national media as the Ceylon Communist Party (Moscow Wing)! He did this more than a year before the historic split of the Indian Communist Party over similar ideological disagreements as in Sri Lanka. As the General Secretary of the Party, he built an organization of dedicated members, who were not large in electoral terms, but whose organizational strength and cadre commitment were comparable and even superior to other larger political parties whose politics is centred on elections, and elections only.

A common compliment paid to Shan by those who worked with him is about his contribution to political education in the Party. It was Shan who popularized the phrase – Marxism, Leninism, Mao Tse-tung thought, and its teaching in Sri Lanka. Hundreds of cadres of all communities passed through Shan. Several future JVPers, including Rohana Wijeweera, were members of Shan's Party and pupils in his classes. Apart from the marginalized among the Sinhalese, Shan reached out to the oppressed castes among the Sri Lankan Tamils, and the Tamil estate workers in the plantations.

In hindsight, it is fair to say that Shan's Communist Party was the strongest microcosm of Sri Lanka's ethnic plurality. Looked at it another way, Shan was the only Sri Lankan Tamil to lead a political party of mostly Sinhalese members. And unlike any other Sri Lankan Left leader, Shan provided counter-traditional leadership on a matter that was at the sensitive core of Tamil society: caste exclusion, especially at places of worship. Equally, he developed a militant following among the Tamil plantation workers, unlike either Tamil political leaders or national Left leaders.

Tamil by accident of birth

The political realignments of the 1960s, gave Shan the perfect platform to attack both the Left and the Tamil Right. He assailed the Left for what he condemned as its parliamentary opportunism and betrayal of minority rights. And he castigated the Tamil political leadership for aligning with the UNP and pussyfooting on caste issues. Shan was quite dogmatic in his belief that parliamentary democracy and the project of socialism were incompatible. So, when the United Front of the SLFP, the LSSP and the CP (Moscow) won a landslide victory in the 1970 elections, Shan may have been hoping for an experiential verdict on the failure of the United Front experiment. It turned out to be far worse than a mere failure in the end. But Shan himself like many others were blindsided by the JVP insurrection, which he had no truck with and condemned it thoroughly. But he was incarcerated by the State for allegedly teaching

revolution to the JVP. He was acquitted without trial after one year in jail at great cost to his health. Shan never quite recovered from the ordeal, physically and politically.

He literally found a second wind after the 1983 riots. That was the year when the dynamic of ethnic politics completely overwhelmed the dynamic of class politics. That was also the year I first met Shan and came to know him reasonably well. Earlier that year, we were both active in a group called the Marx Centenary Committee that was formed to commemorate the death centenary of Karl Marx on the 14th of March, that year. We used to meet regularly at Hector Abhayavardhana's Chitra Lane house, and we continued meeting after the July 1983 riots. Practically everyone who has been someone in the Left movement would show up and the discussions were insightful and politically therapeutic. It was during that time that Shan started writing a flurry of articles to the Daily News on the riots, its aftermaths, and the political relationship between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. There was a new standpoint to his externalization. The old fact that he was a Tamil. Hector Abhayavardhana loved Shan's articles and said, "Shan is discovering himself."

Nearly two decades earlier, sometime in 1967 or 1968, Shan said in a public speech, "I am a Tamil by an accident of birth." I was a student at Peradeniya then, and the statement generated some discussion among Tamil students. There was quite a contingent of Maoists on campus, and to them Shan's statement was a scientific assertion. To others, it seemed a betrayal of his Tamilness to politically appease the Sinhalese. And it was blasphemy to those who had been socialized into believing that being a Tamil, or a Sinhalese, or a Muslim is the biological essence of one's being.

The term 'essentialism' was not in vogue then, at least not in our student circles. Even 'ethnicity' had not entered Sri Lankan political vocabulary at that time. What Shan was asserting then is the rejection of 'ethnic essentialism' that is now commonplace in any social science writing. There is no ethnic essence in any one of us. The tag of ethnicity that is attached at one's birth is an act of

political astrology. Wouldn't Sri Lanka become a better a place instantly, if the country's political leaders were to realize and acknowledge, as Shan did, that their ethnicity is in fact due to an accident of birth?

Finally, it is only ten days to go before the polls. It is countdown time. As I recalled a few weeks ago writing on a different subject, it was Shan who called the recurrence of parliamentary elections as the musical chair game of Sri Lankan politics. I added at that time that the music and the game permanently stopped in 1977. I was promptly corrected online by a very astute observer that the game did not stop, only the music got longer and a lot more jarring. Now there is more than one game – presidential, parliamentary, provincial, and local. Each one of them is apparently an opportunity for the people to exercise a fraction of their franchise – that is if you believe our constitutional blowhards. The games are already less musical and more obstacle. In future, they might be played not to some light music, or even the baila, but to the blaring of the military band.

Ethnic Identity and Birth Certificate

The question of ethnic identity has suddenly become topical with the announcement by the Registrar of Persons that future birth certificates, which will be soon digitized, will not include information on the marital status of parents, their ethnicity, and religion. There is interesting discussion about adopting a consistent naming practice instead of the current practice of using multiple naming conventions. As these changes are apparently meant to be consistent with international standards, it is worth noting that western countries allow multiple naming conventions to accommodate the practices of non-western immigrants.

The politically significant changes are the exclusion of the ethnic and the religious details of the parents in the child's certificate. Shenali Waduge is already calling the new birth certificate "a betrayal of the Sinhala Buddhists." The Daily Financial Times has

editorially commented that excluding these details may create unintended negative consequences for the minorities. Taken as stand alone changes, they are positive developments and in the right direction. Objectively, they will end the old practice of essentializing one's ethnicity in the birth certificate. The worry is that the changes will be reduced to being ostensible only if there are no accompanying changes in the overall position of the minorities in the Sri Lankan political society.

Gayathri Spivak the well-known Bengali-American cultural-literary critic, and feminist, explains well the dilemma of eschewing ethnic essentialism in general, on the one hand, and asserting ethnic identity when it becomes essential, on the other. She calls it 'strategic essentialism' when it is necessary for members of the minority or marginalized groups to assert their identity to challenge the dominance (hegemony) of the majority or the powerful. Spivak argues that strategic essentialism is what enables women and Asians to speak 'as women' and 'as Asians' to challenge the dominance of colonial discourse. It is equally applicable to the situation in Sri Lanka and Shan's life and politics are quite illustrative of the nuances involved.

As I recalled last week, Shan rejected Tamil ethnic essentialism by asserting the obvious that he was a Tamil by accident of birth. Twenty years later, in the wake of the massive 1983 riots against the Tamils, Shan spoke out as a Tamil in defence of Tamil rights and against the state sponsored attacks on them. He did so without compromising any of his universal principles as a Sri Lankan and as a Marxist. Shan went further after 1983. He defended the right of self determination, not necessarily separation. He condemned individual terrorism, but defended violent retaliations against state terrorism. He was critical of the degeneration of Tamil politics to the point where the gun took control of the political process, instead of politics taking control of the gun. And when Satchi Ponnambalam irresponsibly and intellectually dishonestly produced a vitriolic polemic of a book against the entire Sinhala people and their

history, Shan contemptuously dismissed the book as "Tamil nationalism gone mad."

In all of this, Shan, and all leaders of Sri Lanka's old and new Left parties stood their ground on their principles. They did not, unlike their right wing political counterparts and liberal academics, commit what Julien Benda, the French essayist and cultural critic, in an earlier time (1927) had called the "treason of the intellectuals," who abandon their universal principles to prove their ethno-national loyalties.

"Men make their own history, wrote Marx (18th Brumaire), "but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." The roles that that individuals play, are not of their own making. They only occupy sites which emerge in the interplay of socioeconomic forces – be it for mere existence, achievements, or transformation. In every situation, there is room for individual freedom, responsibility, and agency. N. Sanmugathasan belonged to a generation of Left leaders who took upon themselves to be agents for change and for emancipation. In the site he occupied, Shan played a unique role as a Tamil, Sri Lankan, and Marxist.

Sunday Island

19 July 2020 & 26 July 2020

Comrade Shan and the Tamil Militant Armed Struggle

- D.B.S.Jeyaraj -

The China of today is vastly different to the China that I knew of in my younger days. Thinking about the China of those times evokes memories of many things like the cultural revolution, red guards, the great leap forward, the red book of Chairman Mao's thoughts and above all Mao Zedong himself who was known then as Mao Tse-Tung. In the post-Deng Xiaoping China, very little is stated publicly about Mao Zedong the founding father of the Peoples Republic of China. Modern China is rapidly progressing along the "Capitalist High Road" that was so forcefully denounced by the Chinese Communist leader of yore. As far as Sri Lanka is concerned, Mao seems to be virtually forgotten nowadays.

There was however a time when a vigorously vibrant leftist political party espousing the policies and ideology of Mao Zedong known as Maoism flourished in Sri Lanka. It was known as the Ceylon Communist Party (Peking Wing) to denote its pro-China leanings as opposed to the other pro-Soviet Union Communist party (Moscow Wing). Beijing was spelled as Peking then. In its heyday, the Ceylon Communist Party(Peking Wing) controlled many trade unions in the mercantile, industrial, agricultural and plantation sectors. It also spearheaded a massive socio-cultural movement that greatly helped to abolish the cruelty of caste oppression in Jaffna. The party was also the nursery in which Rohana Wijeweera the founder-leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was nurtured. After the demise of Mao and rise of Deng, the Sri Lankan Communist Party remained faithful to pristine Maoism and condemned the new revisionist line. Despite suffering several splits, defections and declining membership, the party along with

other like-minded international Marxist-Leninist groups formed the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM) to re-affirm Maoism. Subsequently the party re-invented itself as the Ceylon Communist Party (Maoist).

The co-founder, leader and driving force behind the Pro-China communist party in Ceylon/Sri Lanka was Nagalingam Sanmugathasan, a Sri Lankan Tamil hailing from Manipay in Jaffna. “Comrade Shan” or “Shan” as he was known functioned as leader at the helm of the party from its inception in 1964 until his death in 1993. “Comrade” Shan was arguably the last great Maoist of Sri Lanka. His name was spelled in English as “Sanmugathasan” in his birth certificate. However in common usage his name was pronounced “Shanmugathasan” and he became known as “Shan”. He was born a hundred years ago on July 3 1920. This article is therefore a birth centenary tribute to “Comrade” Shan.

At the outset I want to state that I am writing this article mainly due to the “gentle” persuasion of Veeragathy Thanabalasingham my former colleague at the leading Tamil daily “Virakesari” where I cut my journalistic teeth.

Thanabalasingham who later became editor of the “Thinakkural” is a consultant at the Express Newspapers group which publishes both the Virakesari and Thinakkural now. He was (and still is) a loyal disciple and follower of Shan. So great was his devotion to Shan that he once turned down an offer to work in his native Jaffna as an editor because he did not want to leave Colombo where Shan was living. In those days he would visit Shan at least once a week and spend some hours with his mentor. My introductory meeting with the Maoist leader was through Thanabalasingham who first took me along with him to Shan’s residence at 23/7 Schofield place in Kollupitiya.

First Meeting With “Comrade” Shan.

My first meeting with “Comrade” Shan was in early 1987. I was then the Colombo correspondent of the Indian English daily “The

Hindu”. I was also engaged in a study of the evolution and growth of the Tamil militant movement in Sri Lanka, for the International Centre of Ethnic Studies (ICES) in Colombo. My discussions with Shan were mostly about the politics of Sri Lanka and India, Tamil militancy and international affairs. I began to meet Shan regularly from early 1987 until late 1988 when I left Sri Lanka for the USA. I used to go alone as well as with Thanabalasingham to see him. Talking or rather posing probing questions and listening to his erudite answers was both pleasant and profitable. I would take notes at times and later write the points down in detail. I learnt a lot from Shan in those days.

Rightly or wrongly, Shan saw the Tamil groups as protectors defending the people from State oppression

Three decades later when I look back with the wisdom of hindsight, I recognize the intrinsic value of what Shan said then. The fate of the LTTE which let the gun determine politics instead of letting politics guide the gun is enough proof of that

During these conversations I discovered something about Shan which delighted me immensely. I found that like me, he too was or had been, a film buff. The popular Tamil cinema actor and Tamil Nadu chief minister M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) died on December 24 1987. I was then writing for “The Island” also. Since the following day was Christmas and I had to go home to Kurunegala, I hurriedly wrote a light-weight article about MGR focusing on some interesting highlights of the actor-politico’s life.

Some days later when I went to see Shan I found that he had read the piece and was most disappointed. “I thought you should have written about MGR differently” said Shan and went on to elaborate. He pointed out how MGR projected himself as a champion of the poor and underprivileged by enacting such roles in his films and portrayed himself as a hero who would help the down-trodden to redress their grievances and achieve their aspirations. As Shan reeled off sequence after sequence and song after song in

MGR's films in support of his basic premise, I realized that he had seen most of the MGR films of the fifties and sixties of the 20th century. When I asked him about it, Shan admitted with a shy smile that he had indeed been an avid film goer from his student days until his incarceration by the Sirima Bandaranaike govt. in the aftermath of the JVP uprising in 1971.

It was in this period of interaction with Shan that the Indo-Lanka accord was signed by Rajiv Gandhi and J.R. Jayewardene on July 29 1987. The Indian Army described as the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) came to Sri Lanka. Soon the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was at war with the IPKF. The proscribed JVP too launched a campaign of violence described as Anti-Indian. Shan was somewhat sympathetic towards the LTTE fight with the IPKF but hostile towards the JVP's anti-Indian campaign.

This was best illustrated in late 1988 at a lecture cum discussion at Fr. Tissa Balasuriya's Centre for Society and Religion in Maradana. The LTTE and JVP opposition to the Indian army was being debated. Kumar Rupasinghe's brother Ajith Rupasinghe - a Maoist himself - was trying to "trap" Shan in a friendly argument. Ajith's position was that if Shan approved of the LTTE fighting the IPKF then he should not disapprove of the JVP. Likewise, if Shan was critical of the JVP then he should condemn the LTTE too. But the veteran polemicist refused to be caught. Shan did not budge. He neither condemned the LTTE nor praised the JVP. This was the last occasion on which I saw Shan.

Evolving Attitude Regarding LTTE

Shan's position on the LTTE fighting the IPKF caused many a misunderstanding and even rifts among his admirers, party members and fellow political travellers. It has even been misconstrued as support for terrorism and separatism. His stance was also surprising to many because Shan had on earlier occasions condemned Tamil militancy as "individual terrorism". Furthermore people expected the veteran Marxist to be sympathetic to the Tamil groups

regarded as “leftists” like the Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) as opposed to “rightists” like the LTTE. Though somewhat confusing, Shan’s evolving attitude regarding the LTTE requires a more detailed explanation. It must be understood that though appreciative of certain aspects of the LTTE, Shan had no illusions about the tigers or any other Tamil armed group for that matter.

I think it was this perception of the LTTE vis-a-vis India which influenced Shan into adopting a favourable attitude towards the tigers

There was one incident which I recall even now. Much of the literature put out by the Tamil militant groups in the early days for propaganda purposes had a lot of leftist discourse and Marxist-Leninist jargon in them. Once while conversing with Shan, I asked him whether this suggested that the armed groups were left-oriented and were supportive of a Socialist Tamil state. He was dismissive. Shan said that the “boys” had taken to the gun first and then looked around for an ideology that would justify their violence and that they had found it in Marxism. However he did say that whatever the reason, their choice of Marxism was not to be faulted. But Shan was not sure whether their commitment was really genuine. He was also doubtful as to whether they had made a thorough study of Marxism or acquired only a superficial understanding adequate for cosmetic purposes.

On another occasion I was relating some of my experiences as a student in Jaffna in the early seventies. I told him that there was a lot of Tamil graffiti in those days quoting Mao, about political power growing out of the barrel of a gun. Shan immediately retorted that Mao had also taught that the gun must not be allowed to command the party and that the party must always dictate to the gun. What Shan emphasized was, that politics should guide the fighters and not vice versa. Three decades later when I look back with the wisdom of hindsight, I recognize the intrinsic value of what Shan said then. The fate of the LTTE which let the gun deter-

mine politics instead of letting politics guide the gun is enough proof of that. The Tamil Self -Rule Party formed by former Kayts MP, V. Navaratnam in 1968 contested the 1970 Parliamentary poll advocating a country for the Tamils. It was routed at the hustings. However the Ilankai Thamil Arasuk Katchi (ITAK) and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) came together and formed the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in 1976. The Tamil Eelam declaration was formally adopted on May 14 1976. Even before that, starting from the 25th anniversary celebrations of the ITAK in 1974, the separate state demand was being bandied about by Tamil nationalist politicians. They were talking of realizing their objective through a non-violent struggle. Among those who vehemently challenged the notion of a separate state, was Shan.

Dharmar-Shan Debate In Chunnakam

In 1975 a public debate was organized between ITAK MP for Uduvil (later Manipay) Viswanathar Dharmalingam (Father of PLOTE Leader D. Siddharthan MP) and Nagalingam Shanmugathasan of the Communist Party (Peking wing) in Chunnakam, then regarded as a leftist citadel. The debate was chaired by retired school principal, “Orator” C. Subramaniam who had taught both. The pros and cons of a separate state were extensively debated. After making fun of the idea of a separate state being established through a non-violent struggle, Shan challenged Dharmar to reveal the action plan through which a separate state was going to be set up. Dharmalingam prevaricated by saying it was a top party secret. There was a loud outcry from the audience that Dharmalingam should give a concrete answer. “Orator” Subramaniam saved Dharmalingam from a tricky situation by intervening and saying that the ITAK Parliamentarian could not be pressured into disclosing a party secret. Thus the debate ended in a “draw” but everyone knew Shan was the victor.

A chicken struggling to be born had to peck the egg shell from within, crack it and then come out if it wanted to live

Another incident I remember is a public seminar at the Wellawatte Ramakrishna Hall organized by the Law College Tamil Union in 1976. Shan was one of the speakers. In that speech Shan mocked the idea that a separate state could be achieved through a non-violent struggle. He said that a meaningful change by overthrowing the state was possible only through revolutionary violence. He cited two examples in support of violence as a mode for change. One was about how a chicken struggling to be born had to peck the egg shell from within, crack it and then come out if it wanted to live. The other was to say that according to Hindu mythology even the gods used weapons to eradicate evil through violence. Lord Shiva had his "Soolam" (trident) Lord Vishnu had his "Chakra" (Spinning Disc) and Lord Muruga his "Vel" (Javelin Spear).

Shan however was not supportive of Tamil militancy in its embryonic stage. When armed Tamil youths began gunning down policemen engaged in tracking them down and politicians dubbed as so called traitors, Shan was critical. He regarded those as acts of individual terrorism. He perceived them as romantic adventurism based on petit-bourgeois ideology. His position began to change after President J.R. Jayewardene declared an emergency for Jaffna alone in 1979 and deployed the army. Then came the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983 where he directly witnessed the carnage and destruction in Colombo.

Thereafter Shan was more benign towards Tamil militancy. He began to justify armed Tamil militancy as a "necessary evil" to combat racist harassment and military suppression. Rightly or wrongly, Shan saw the Tamil groups as protectors defending the people from State oppression. In taking this position, Shan was not oblivious to mistakes made in policy and practice by the militants. The disunity among the Tamil groups eventually resulting in fratricidal warfare, was troubling. As a Maoist, Shan was convinced the Tamil militants had to learn from the great helmsman about conducting a protracted people's war. He emphasized the importance of mass organizations. More importantly Shan wanted the militants to desist from engaging in "terrorist" acts and harming civilians. He

advised the militants to follow Mao's rules of discipline and conduct for guerillas. Shan wrote several essays in Tamil and English in this regard.

LTTE Resisting Indian Expansion

The advent of the Indian Army had a profound impact on Shan. He was convinced quite correctly that New Delhi had used Tamil militancy to undermine the Sri Lankan state and then stepped in with their "good offices" to sign the Indo-Lanka accord and annexure letters to exercise hegemony over the Island. In that context, Shan perceived the LTTE with all its faults as the only force resisting what he termed as Indian expansion.

I was in Jaffna when war erupted between the IPKF and LTTE. I returned to Colombo with details of how the civilians were being victimised in the war by the Indian army. These accounts were published in the "Sunday Island" then. An interview with the then Tiger deputy leader "Mahathaya" was also published. In a bid to "silence" me, Indian diplomats in Colombo pressured President Jayewardene into arresting me on the pretext of inquiring about Mahathaya. Due to protests from fellow scribes in Lanka and abroad, I was released on bail later with a "case" pending in court as to whether I had committed an offence or not. There were several dates where the CID said they were still investigating. Later the file went up to the Attorney-General's dept. Finally the A-G ruled there was no case against me. During this period, Shan was very concerned and kept abreast of what was happening in court. He also questioned me intensively about conditions in Jaffna and the IPKF-LTTE war. I still remember his saying that whatever their flaws the Tigers were courageously defying the Indian army's aggression. He said India was the main enemy at that juncture. I think it was this perception of the LTTE vis-a-vis India which influenced Shan into adopting a favourable attitude towards the tigers. Besides as a revolutionary advocating armed struggle against the state, it was a case of the Tigers putting into practice what he had envisaged in theory.

The JVP of Rohana Wijeweera too had commenced an anti-Indian campaign in defence of the motherland at that time but Shan was not sympathetic. He would say that the JVP should go to the North-East and fight the IPKF like the LTTE instead of terrorizing the south. He was very angry over Vijaya Kumaratunga's murder. Shan compared the JVP at that time to Italy's Mussolini and said the JVP had a neo-fascist tendency. He said Wijeweera was utilizing the anti-Indian feelings in the country to promote communalism in the name of patriotism Shan described Wijeweera's JVP in Marxist terminology as being "counter-revolutionary"

For Self-Determination Not Secession

Shan's views on the national question also changed with the passage of time. After going abroad, I learnt from his writings, that he was for the right of self determination for the Sri Lankan Tamils. In earlier days Shan had opined that Sri Lankan Tamils were not entitled to national self-determination as they did not fit Stalin's conditions of a Nation. "A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture." Though Shan was for self -determination, he was not for secession. He was for regional autonomy where the territorially contiguous Tamil areas of the Northern and Eastern provinces would form a single regional unit.

There are many more things to write about Comrade Shan and his political life. Graduating in 1943 and opting to work as full time for the Communist Party for a 60 rupee salary; the ideological split in the CP and the birth of the Peking wing Communist Party; the battle for trade union control; Rohana Wijeweera's capture; the mass movement against caste oppression in Jaffna; rise of the dynamic Red Flag union in the plantations; the meetings with Mao; the JVP's 1971 revolt and the imprisonment of Shan. All these and more need to be written about in detail on another occasion.

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Some Notes About Shan: A Remarkable Personality

- Manik de Silva -

Dayan Jayatillake's piece last Sunday, written on the occasion of the birth centenary of N.Sanmugathan on July 3 prompts these personal anecdotes of my own interactions with Shan which, I believe, may interest at least older readers with memories of a by-gone era.

First, the purist in me applauds Jayatillake for getting Shan's name right. Although he was Sanmugathan, he was best known as "Shan" and was spoken of and inaccurately written about as Shanmugathan. Shan, of course sounds much better than "San" ever would. As Jayatillake has recounted, it was his father, the well known journalist Mervyn de Silva, who (jokingly) christened Shan as "Mao Tse Shan". His commitment to the Chinese brand of Communism was absolute and remained so until the end of his life.

He was probably one of the few Communists from our part of the world who had conversed with Chairman Mao and stood alongside him at a massive parade in Beijing. Jayatillake says that Charu Muzumdar, the founder - leader of India's Maoist movement, best known as the Naxalites, never met Mao. But Shan stood with the Chairman at Tien An Men Square at the height of the Cultural Revolution when Mao reviewed a parade of one and a half a million marching Red Guards.

Among my memories is that of Shan telling me that he was nicknamed "baaldi karaya" by his JVP fellow inmates in jail when he was imprisoned following the 1971 insurrection. This was because his osteo - arthritis made it impossible for him to squat, and he was

allowed a commode (not a flush toilet) by the prison authorities. He was obliged to clean-up after himself and hence the nickname.

As Jayatillake has trenchantly recounted, "Shan may be seen as the founder and 'Vice-Chancellor' of the 'University' of Marxist-Leninist learning every committed Lankan revolutionary, South and North, graduated from never stayed on in". He rightly says that the JVP, though not itself a Maoist movement, emerged from the bowels of the Maoist movement with its leading cadres for the most part being ex-Maoist.

Rohana Wijeweera was one such, and I clearly recall him in a blue tunic suit sporting a Mao badge at the proceedings of the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC) at an old Fort building (once a Navy mess?) refurbished as a court room for the trial. Presided by Chief Justice HNG Fernando, that CJC tried the leaders of the 1971 insurrection. Shan, however, was not one of the accused though he was jailed at the time..Wijeweera walked up to me at the press table and inquired "Who are you working for?" Although I was a Lake House reported then, I think I was there for the Associated Press (AP), the U.S news agency for which I was stringing. I replied "AP" and he responded "oh AP" although I don't think he knew the name with most Lankans only familiar with the Reuters news agency at that time.

In the 1960s, the Jaffna branch of Shan's party was leading an armed mass struggle. Speaking of a killing at Chankanai over caste differences, A.Amirthalingam of the Federal Party said in Parliament that those differences were being gradually ironed out when Shan moved into the picture. Denzil Pieris, my editor at the 'Observer', asked me to get Shan's reaction to what Amirthalingam has said. I vividly recall his short to-the-point answer quoting Mao: "Where there is oppression, there will be resistance".

I also remember then Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, Major Montague Jayawickrema, responding to an allegation in Parliament about telephone tapping saying this was legally per-

missible but only on the authorization of the then Governor-General. He said that two telephones were tapped at the time and one of them was Shan's. If Jayawickema revealed who's the other phone was, I can't remember the name he mentioned.

A skilled writer, his party during the later years existed only in the newspapers with many of his statements published in the 'Observer'. Thereafter he also appeared in the 'Lanka Guardian'. He wrote a book, I believe published at his own expense, of which he gave me a copy at his Schofield Place, Kollupitiya, home when I visited him following his release from jail. His daughter, actually the daughter of his second wife who was the widow of P.Kandiah of the Communist Party, whom he adored, asked him "can we afford it?" when he made the gift.

Kumar David, our regular columnist, said last Sunday that Kandiah, MP for Point Pedro, was the only Tamil leftist elected from the North on the ticket of a left party in 70 years. He made an interesting historical point.

When Shan broke from the Ceylon Communist Party over the Moscow - Peking differences, he took away its name and the Ceylon Trade Union Federation (CTUF) which was a powerful union of the day. The Moscow wing styled itself as the Communist Party of Ceylon. An alumnus of the University College of the colonial days he married Sita Wickramasuriya whom he met there.

He, together with Bala Tampoe, were undoubtedly the ablest negotiators representing the working class before Labour Tribunals in those days. I remember Eric Ranawaka, my colleague at the 'Ovserver' who left Lake House to join the Employers Federation of Ceylon, saying that he was proud to be a Ceylonese when he sat in on negotiations between the Federation and the unions. This because he saw Bala Tampoe running circles round the British mercantile leaders of the day.

Although Dayan Jayatillake has not said so in his article last Sunday, I know Shan hid him in his (Shan's) home when Jayatillake was underground here before he fled to India.

Let me conclude this note with a last anecdote about Shan. I learned perhaps from the dedication of his book that his grandson had been named Satyan (Truth), undoubtedly influenced by San-mugathan. Shan intensely disliked the thought of leaving this country but I believed he eventually did so at his (step) daughter's insistence that he joins her family in England. She's China trained acupuncturist. Given the circumstances he was placed in here with just a domestic to care for him (which she did devotedly), the move must have been for the better where Shan was concerned. He died overseas.

Sunday Island,

11 July 2020

Sanmugathasan and Wijeweera

- Sarath Amunugama -

Readers of this newspaper are indebted to Dayan Jayatilleke and Manik de Silva for drawing our attention to the life and work of N Sanmugathasan, the Communist leader, Trade Unionist and ideologue, on his birth centenary. In my experience there have been four Tamil Marxist leaders who, though emerging from a minority community, were given the highest recognition by their respective Marxist parties at a certain period of its history. But their ultimate political fates were blighted by the communalist politics that dominated the country after the mid nineteen fifties.

These four outstanding Tamil Marxists were N . Sanmugathasan and P Kandiah of the Ceylon Communist Party and V Karalasingham [Karlo] and Bala Tampoe of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party. All of them were dedicated Marxists and cosmopolitan intellectuals who as Jawarharlal Nehru said 'were at home nowhere'. All of them remained steadfast to their ideological commitments no matter the trials and tribulations and the disappointments they had to undergo. However they enjoyed a middle class life style which was not approved by their proletarian comrades. They were all interred with their coffins draped in the red banner.

Of the four, I knew only Bala Tampoe personally. While working for UNESCO at its headquarters in Paris in 1984, I represented the DG Mr M'Bow at a meeting in Moscow and after its close arrived at the Sheramateyvo airport to catch a flight home to France. Bala had come to Moscow for a trade union conference and was flying to Paris for a meeting with the political editor of 'Le Monde'. Though he did not tell me that I suspected that he was also meeting some

big wigs of the Fourth International which had its dingy headquarters in some obscure part of Paris.

We had adjacent seats on the Air France flight and had an interesting discussion over fine wines and superb French food. I recall that Air France was at that time fighting with Aeroflot for their market share of the increasingly profitable Moscow-Paris sector. One way to beat the somewhat stodgy Soviet airline was to offer top of the line French cuisine and a super efficient cabin crew.

The following day I took Bala to lunch at a Michelin rated restaurant near UNESCO Headquarters at Place Fontenoy and we became friends. He was well aware of UNESCO as an uncle of his from South India- a Mr Phillips - had been an important founder administrator of the UN body. I had seen P Kandiah as an undergraduate at Peradeniya when he, as the only Tamil MP from the North produced by a Marxist party, spoke brilliantly to us on the Communist Party position on the Sinhala Only Act.

Both Dayan and Manik did not refer to Sanmugathasan's decisive role in the career of Wijeweera and his founding of the JVP. It was Shan who recruited Wijeweera to be the youth leader of his China wing of the Communist party. I have referred to this encounter in my essay on 'A sociological analysis of the leadership of the JVP' which was published in a book entitled 'Dreams of Change; Land, Labour and Conflict in Sri Lanka' [Vijitha Yapa Publications 2018].

How did Wijeweera look upon his predicament after he was refused a visa to return to Moscow to complete his studies? He attributed the rejection to pressure on the Soviet Embassy by the local CP. In particular he suspected the Communist leader KP Silva who had met him and a batch mate named Dharmasiri in Moscow. Dharmasiri, a young journalist, was popular and was looked upon by the CCP as a future leader. It may well have been Dharmasiri's orthodoxy and popularity that led Wijeweera to adopt an opposing 'China Line.'

Dharmasiri was later killed in air crash in the USSR. A special personality trait of Wijeweera was that he could not brook any challenge to his authority and would use all his energies to show up rivals in a bad light. In the CP he first befriended Premalal Kumarasiri, who had been a supporter of Dr SA Wickremasinghe and a brilliant Sinhala orator and a Member of Parliament from Matara District.

Kumarasiri by this time had allied himself with Sanmugathasan and was a senior leader of the China Wing. Thus Wijeweera was able to engage early with the top leaders of the Sanmugathasan group. Victor Ivan has written that Wijeweera's knowledge of the Russian language had put him in good stead among the faction ridden Communists as no other leader, including Shan, could speak Russian or boast of an extended stay in the 'Socialist Motherland'. True to form, Kumarasiri began to have differences with Shan who then turned to Wijeweera as a way of bolstering his strength.

He was appointed the leader of Shan's Youth League which gave him an exceptional opportunity to penetrate the former's organization and establish a group within a group which boded ill for his leader who was preoccupied with his theoretical concerns and Trade Union work. The anti-Shan group also played on their leader's Tamil nationality and accused him of filling important positions with his Tamil apparatchiks.

For instance the party newspapers were put under the supervision of a Tamil comrade who was personally loyal to Shan. In 1965 Shan decided to contest the General election to Parliament from the Colombo South constituency in the belief that large numbers of Tamils residing there would vote for him. He appointed Wijeweera as an organizer in his election campaign but that is unlikely to have done any good because Shan was soundly defeated and even lost his deposit.

This humiliating defeat added to Shan's woes and Wijeweera began organizing his own coterie at the expense of his nominal leader. This did not escape Sanmugathasan scrutiny and Wijeweera

was expelled. He however saw this as an opportunity to set up his own party, the JVP, with fellow defecting China liners as its backbone.

Among them were Wijeweera's first Deputy leader Wijesena Vithana who assumed the 'nom de guerre' of Sanath Boraluketiya. He was a teacher and the District Secretary of the China wing of the CCP in Anuradhapura. Other China wing leaders were Nimalasiri Jayasinghe of Kelaniya and Dinoris who was a Trade Unionist from the Land Development Department, W.T, Karunaratne, (Secretary, China Wing branch, Wattala, SVA Piyatileke of Wattala and China Wing member Nihal Dias (Undergraduate and Secretary of the China wing branch Panadura) were Wijeweera's early supporters.

It was one thing for him to be the leader of a critical minority within Shan's party; but it was another to establish a radical party on his own. At this juncture we see the innovative skills of Wijeweera which can be compared to the leadership qualities which characterize outstanding left leaders. He was able to fuse several strands of radical organizations which had up to now played only a peripheral role in the left movement and had been ignored or marginalized by the leaders of the traditional left.

The old left could never creatively employ the commitment and enthusiasm of a class outside their middle class inner circle. They had extinguished that radical spirit through their Parliamentaryism and upper middle class lifestyles. The rise of the proletarians through Wijeweera's JVP marked the beginning of the end of the old left.

In one of the five lectures of the original JVP, the traditional left becomes the object of ridicule and hate. The newly minted JVP mercilessly drove the LSSP and CP into extinction. In their lectures JVP leaders emphasized the alienation of the left leaders from the true oppressed in the country. While the LSSP and the CP were shifting to coalition politics with the SLFP, Wijeweera followed his

early mentor Shan in describing the UNP and SLFP as “Senior and junior members of the same capitalist club”.

Shan was a prolific writer. We see a presentation of his ideas in two books entitled ‘A Marxist looks at the history of Ceylon’ [1972] and “The Memoirs of an Unrepentant Communist” [1989]. He saw modern Sri Lankan history as an “Overarching of its pro-imperialist and comprador character in the orientation of its ruling classes and political culture.” This is contrasted with the Indian freedom movement with its popular anti-colonial nationalism. Shan says “Ceylon had no national bourgeoisie and no revolutionary movement as in India.” He adds that “the achieving of Ceylonese independence was not so much a rupture but an unseen transition from Colonialism to Neo- colonialism.”

According to Sanmugathasan, such a continuation of neo-colonial policies led to multiple crises which prepared the ground for the emergence of a more nationally oriented party, the SLFP. However the class composition of the leaders of the new party were not very different from that of the pro-imperialists and were in Shan’s words “motivated by personal rivalry, political opportunism and populism.” Being populist the SLFP was more likely to be communalist and by allying themselves with the SLFP the Left too had no option but to follow the same communal path as it was now firmly wedded to Parliamentary politics and wanted to maximize their electoral prospects.

Wijeweera’s early political analysis was heavily dependent on Shan’s theories. He too did not see a great difference between the UNP and the SLFP though for tactical reasons he would ally himself with one or the other. However, Wijeweera, now well on his way to promoting “Sinhala Socialism,” rejected Shan’s emphasis on the plantation proletariat as the vanguard of the local revolution and his attempts to mobilize them under the “Red Flag” banner in the hill country.

Remembering Sanmugathasan in the Midst of the Crisis of Our Time

*July 3, 2020 was the birth centenary of Sanmugathasan
who fought revisionist tendencies within Marxism
throughout his political life*

- Veeragathy Thanabalasingham -

Many of our left leaders who began their political life in earnest in the early part of the last century to change history turned into prisoners of the very same history within two decades. The lure of power and privilege that came with ministerial and other high level positions in government made them embrace a politics of class compromise and collaboration. Their reliance on opportunistic shortcuts in the name of tactics to attract votes at parliamentary elections had severely damaged the integrity and the future of the left movement in Sri Lanka. However, there were a few exceptional leaders on the left who never succumbed to opportunist and capitulationist tendencies. Among them was Nagalingam Sanmugathasan, one of the leaders of the country's communist movement, and popularly known as 'Shan', whose birth centenary fell on July 3, 2020. N. Sanmugathasan, the founding father of the Maoist movement in Sri Lanka, deserves to be remembered for his contributions to the working class movement and the fight against revisionism. He was a leading theoretician of the international Maoist movement.

Born on 3 July 1920 in Manipay, Jaffna, Shan read for a degree in history at the University College, Colombo, where he was a popular student leader. In July 1943, soon after sitting the final examination at the university, he joined the newly formed Com-

munist Party. The Party was barely two weeks old when he joined it as a full-timer. Since then, Shan's life had been so intimately linked with the history of the communist movement. Shan, the respected Marxist intellectual, served as a teacher and guide in Marxist theory and international politics for generations of communist activists and other politically engaged progressives. The political classes he regularly conducted for nearly three decades since the latter part of 1950 in Colombo and other parts of the country always drew an impressive number of participants. Indeed, the continuous popularity enjoyed by these classes was an acknowledgement of Shan's mastery of dialectical materialism and pedagogic skills.

Shan's contribution to the popularisation of the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism far outweighed that of any other left leader in this country. He was consistently engaged in ideological struggles against Trotskyism, reformism and modern revisionism. As the leader of the Ceylon Trade Union Federation (CTUF), he played an important role in many working class struggles including the 1947 general strike, 1953 Hartal, and the 1955 transport workers' strike.

However, he was expelled from the Communist Party in 1963 for opposing the revisionist line of the Party. Shortly before that, he had visited China for discussions with the Chinese Communist Party. Even before the Sino-Soviet ideological conflict came to the open, it was known that there were differences within the Ceylon Communist Party on issues such as the position on the so called parliamentary road to socialism and on the united front with the LSSP. Shan protested his expulsion as an act that violated the party's constitution. In October 1963, he issued a statement that the struggle would continue and identified the following immediate tasks: a) publication of Sinhala translations of important Marxist theoretical works, b) publication of 'Kamkaruwa' and 'Thozhilali' (the Sinhala and Tamil editions of CTUF's paper 'Worker') as high quality weeklies and make them daily papers within one year, c) publication of good quality Sinhala and Tamil Marxist theoret-

ical periodicals, and d) build up the unity of the trade union movement and establish a united trade union centre as quickly as possible, and d) mobilise peasants and create a worker-peasant alliance.

The CP finally split in two in January 1964 into pro-Moscow and pro-Peking wings. Shan, Premalal Kumarasiri and several other leaders condemned and rejected the pro-Moscow revisionist line of the party and the leadership of Dr S A Wickremasinghe and Peter Keuneman and created a separate central committee and announced the formation of the Communist Party (Peking).

The CP (Peking) earned a reputation due to its revolutionary political line and the militant struggles it organised and led. The CTUF and the plantation workers' union provided a strong working class base for the new party, which was also able to win over large sections of the youth league of the original CP. Even though it preached armed struggle as a justifiable means to achieve its goal, the party did not take any step towards such a struggle on a national scale. However, Tamil militant movements were influenced by the party's theoretical defence of armed struggle and, even more importantly, by the practical experience of the 'Mass movement for the eradication of untouchability' launched by the party in Jaffna in 1966. In the face of violence unleashed by the upper castes and the police, this movement metamorphosed into an armed uprising of the oppressed castes led by Sanmugathasan. Of all the struggles for social justice in Sri Lanka, this was perhaps the most successful in terms of the results achieved.

There had been discussions and debates among historians, Marxist intellectuals and left activists regarding Shan's contributions to revolutionary communism. However, he was the undisputed founding leader and guide of the Maoist movement in this country. Shan's close friend and leading English journalist and editor, Mervyn de Silva, nicknamed him Mao tse - Shan, with a touch of humour in an article. Shan visited China during the Cultural Revolution and addressed a gathering of thousands of Red Guards. His writings on Marxism Leninism and Mao's Thoughts were published in 'The

Bright Red Banner of Mao tse – Tung’s Thought’ which had an international readership. He served as a key link between various Marxist-Leninist parties and the Communist Party of China. He maintained close contact with the Naxalite movement in India.

After the insurrection launched by the JVP in 1971, Shan was arrested and detained for one year. He was vehemently critical of the JVP, which originated from within the CP (Peking). He was arrested because of his open advocacy of armed struggle and for being a political mentor to JVP’s leader Rohana Wijeweera. While in detention, Shan wrote a book entitled ‘A Marxist Looks at the History of Ceylon’ in English, which was published in 1989. Sinhala and Tamil translations of the book were published later.

China’s support for the Srimavo Bandaranaike government after the 1971 insurrection had adverse political consequences for the CP (Peking). Some groups within the party tried to capture the leadership when Shan was out of the country. Their moves were defeated after Shan returned. Some of the expelled persons formed a new party which later splintered into different factions. Some of them turned into supporters of the United Front government of Mrs Bandaranaike while the CP (Peking) continued on its path of struggle.

After the death of Mao in 1976, the ‘Gang of Four’ which firmly followed his policies began to lose support within the Chinese party. In Sri Lanka, the groups that broke away or expelled from the CP (Peking) supported China’s domestic and foreign policies, while Shan’s party firmly supported Mao’s and the Cultural Revolution’s legacies. Shan actively devoted himself to the task of establishing the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM). He rejected Enver Hoxha’s critique of Mao and offered a detailed reply in ‘Enver Hoxha Refuted’, which was published by RIM.

CP (Peking) was reorganised and renamed as Ceylon Communist Party (Maoist) in 1991. Shan led the party until his death in 1993. The last public event in which he participated was a press

conference organised by the International Emergency Committee of the RIM in support of the leader of the Communist Party of Peru (Shining Path) Dr Abimael Guzman in London. Shan passed away on 8 February 1993 at the age of 74 in England where he was receiving medical treatment while staying with his daughter, who is an acupuncture specialist.



Birth Centenary of N. Shanmugathasan

A common compliment paid to Shan by those who worked with him is about his contribution to political education in the Party. It was Shan who popularized the phrase – Marxism, Leninism, Mao Tse-tung thought, and its teaching in Sri Lanka. Hundreds of cadres of all communities passed through Shan..... In hindsight, it is fair to say that Shan's Communist Party was the strongest microcosm of Sri Lanka's ethnic plurality. Looked at it another way, Shan was the only Sri Lankan Tamil to lead a political party of mostly Sinhalese members. And unlike any other Sri Lankan Left leader, Shan provided counter-traditional leadership on a matter that was at the sensitive core of Tamil society: caste exclusion, especially at places of worship. Equally, he developed a militant following among the Tamil plantation workers, unlike either Tamil political leaders or national Left leaders.

- Rajan Phillips

Comrade Shan knew Mao and represented him. He was the only Sri Lankan and one of the very few South Asians to have had conversations with him. The founder-leader of India's Maoist movement the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) much better known as the Naxalites, Charu Mazumdar, never met Mao. Shan, however, stood with Mao at Tien An Men square at the height of the Cultural Revolution when Mao reviewed one and half million Red Guards marching as the sun rose..... Most striking was the ideological role played by the Sri Lankan Maoist leader internationally. Shan was one of the first in the world to found a Maoist communist party, breaking away from the Moscow-centric CP. His skills with the English language and his knowledge of Marxist-Leninist doctrine made him an ideal representative for the Communist Party of China in the global polemic with the pro-Moscow parties.

- Dr. Dayan Jayatileka

Shan's views on the national question also changed with the passage of time. After going abroad, I learnt from his writings that he was for the right of self determination for the Sri Lankan Tamils. In earlier days Shan had opined that Sri Lankan Tamils were not entitled to national Self-Determination as they did not fit Stalin's conditions of a Nation. Though Shan was for self-determination, he was not for secession. He was for regional autonomy where the territorially contiguous Tamil areas of the Northern and Eastern provinces would form a single regional unit.

- DBS Jeyaraj