

The Activities of the Radical Political Associations of Sri Lanka: The Young Lanka League

R. H. R. Gunawardena.

Many constituent aspects of the emergence and growth of the nationalist movement of Sri Lanka under the British rule has been subjected to detailed historical investigations. Most of these studies, however, concentrate on the movement of the English educated class for constitutional reforms. Studies on the elite and elite formation by scholars such as Michael Roberts, Ralph Peiris, and Marshal R. Singer cover various aspects of social transformation linked with the growth of the capitalist class.¹ The early working class movement has been extensively studied by Kumari Jayawardane.² The development of the radical political associations constitutes an important aspect of the nationalist movement, especially in view of the significant role they played in the subsequent political process. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the origin, development and the activities of the Young Lanka League, the earliest radical political association in Sri Lanka.

The distinction between moderates and radicals became more pronounced during the period of political agitation after 1915. The Young Lanka League was the first association that was formed by the radicals of Sri Lanka in the wave of revolutionary agitation and nationalism in many parts of the world.

This League emerged from among the English educated persons who were not inclined to back the moderate leadership of the reform movement. The League intended to organise the educated youth in Sri Lanka to adopt a radical approach in the agitation for constitutional reforms. In its opinion the capabilities of the youth in Sri Lanka had not been fully realised when

compared to other countries.³ **Young Lanka** the organ of the League stated that "this is pre-eminently the age of young men, and in Turkey, China, Egypt and in India they are considered a potent factor."

The initiative and leadership in the formation of this league was taken by A. E. Goonasingha. He became interested in social and welfare activities when he was a student at Dharmaraja College, Kandy, a Buddhist school which was managed by the Buddhist Theosophical Society. He formed a society in the College for the purpose of checking smoking among students and for promoting their general welfare.⁴ His public social welfare activities really started with the formation of the Young Men's Association which was formed at Dehiwala with the object of developing a spirit of nationalism among the young in Sri Lanka.⁵ Hence-forward Goonasingha became, a member of the Ceylon Labour Union which was founded in 1913. It appears that Goonasingha did not approve the moderate leadership of the union and hence launched an association called the National Party on the anniversary of the Kandyan Convention. The object of this association was the development of the national language, of inter-racial relationships, handicrafts, the promotion of agriculture and the boycott of foreign goods.⁶ Goonasingha hoped to adopt a more radical approach regarding political reforms through this association. His activities received a set-back during the riotous days of 1915. After 52 days of imprisonment he displayed a notable upsurge of nationalist sentiment and was drawn towards militant trade unionism and a radical constitutional agitation.

Goonasingha's activities at the beginning did not merge with the mass population. The newspaper **Searchlight** which was started by him in 1913 and the **Nation** were meant for the English educated classes. He became the sub-editor of **People**, the newspaper started by E. T. de Silva, but this paper was also published for the English educated class.

However, the impact made by Goonasingha led to the formation in 1918, of a political association called the Young Lanka League with the support of a few other English educated radicals.

E. A. P. Wijerathne, A. P. Thambayah, Valentine S. Perera and C. H. Z. Fernando joined Goonasinha in this endeavour. The membership of this association was not limited to any single caste, race or religion.⁸ In 1920 Victor Corea who was an advocate, assumed the office of the President, while Goonasinha became the Secretary. Meetings of this League were held at Anderson College,⁹ Colombo, a school begun by Goonasinha.

The League's activities were confined to Colombo and it remained a body consisting of English educated Sri Lankans. The leaders neither took an interest in extending its activities in areas outside the city nor in forming branch associations. Although Victor Corea claimed to be the President of the League with a membership of thousands, the number of members actually enrolled in it by 1921 was only 124.¹⁰

The League did not approve of the political leaders of the time. The **Young Lanka** stated that "our leaders with a few, very few notable exceptions, have failed, grossly failed, in discharging their duties towards us."¹¹ The Journal further stated that "instead of encouraging the noble aspirations of our youth, they have chosen to call them 'boyish' or 'chimerical', instead of directing us aright along the proper path of political development, these so-called leaders have not led us at all." In the opinion of the League P. Arunachalam's "the Case for Constitutional Reforms" was a timid document lacking force or vigour.¹²

The ultimate goal of the League was "**Swaraj**" and to achieve this end it preferred the policy adopted by Gandhi in India. The League stated in 1919 that responsible government was the only panacea for the ills that the Ceylonese were suffering from and the only guarantee of good government.¹³ The League maintained that the European bureaucracy was largely responsible for the mismanagement of public revenue, irrigation works and the neglect of education. The only way to overcome this state of affairs, it argued was to gain 'swaraj' for Ceylon.¹⁴ To achieve this goal, the League endeavoured to embrace within its fold every young

member of the permanent population and to revive the spirit of patriotism and foster it by encouraging the study of Lanka's history and literature.¹⁵ In its agitation for political reforms the League exhibited anti-British feelings.

Instead of 'debating societies' like the Ceylon National Association which were inactive in the reform agitation, the need for forming a Congress was welcomed by Goonasinha in 1914.¹⁶ The leaders of the Young Lanka League co-operated with the nationalist leaders in the formation of the Congress. The journal **Young Lanka** was of opinion that they should unite all the political forces in Sri Lanka through this congress.¹⁷ It was to be managed and directed by the ablest and wisest men of the time.

After the formation of the Ceylon National Congress the League assumed the role of a radical pressure group. The ideologies and attitudes of the Congress leadership were severely criticised by the League. In its opinion the Congress deputation sent to England in 1919 was a "grotesque clique" consisted of students and holiday seekers in England¹⁸. The Congress, it said, were on the wrong side of moderation¹⁹. At this session, Victor Corea advised the people to use boycott as a weapon more effective than prayers and petitions. But none in the Congress supported him.²⁰

The League thought of advocating a boycott movement as a protest against the British policy of delaying reforms for Sri Lanka. "Use the very weapon, that the Englishmen used by means of Labour Unions and such like institutions, organize strikes and use that very formidable weapon boycott," demanded Victor Corea²¹. The League rejected the Manning reforms granted in 1920. It stated that the Manning reforms were a 'standing menace and an abiding insult' to the people and had done for Ceylon what Lord Curson did for India.²² Victor Corea urged the Congress to boycott the reforms until the authorities realized that the people of this island were not to be insulted and treated like children.²³ The Ceylon National Congress, at this stage favoured the inauguration of a non-participation movement but the League advocated a total boycott movement as a protest against the reforms.

However, the demand for radical changes in the constitution were confined to the annual general meetings of the League and the sessions of the Congress. After the meetings the cry gradually died down. Though the League raised the cry for a total boycott movement, ultimately it unanimously resolved to join the non-participation campaign proposed by the Congress.²⁴ The members of the League went round the city of Colombo and the outstation towns assisting the Congress in the campaign for the registration of voters.²⁵

The Young Lanka League was responsible for inaugurating the activities and meetings in connection with the National Day of Mourning. On Goonasinha's suggestion, the first day of June every year, was accepted as the Day of National Mourning and it was decided to commemorate it until the demands that were submitted by the meeting held after the withdrawal of martial law in 1915, were granted.²⁶ From the year 1921, the National Day of Mourning was observed on the 5th Day of June, the day on which martial law was proclaimed in 1915.²⁷ On that day the League attempted to persuade the business establishments in Colombo to put up their shutters and to persuade people to hoist black and white flags in every home.²⁸ The programme for the day was a public meeting and a mass procession to the cemetery to honour the persons who died during the riots.²⁹ In 1920, E. A. P. Wijeratne brought forward a resolution to erect a national memorial column at the cemetery in memory of those who died during the riots. Large crowds participated at these meetings. The **Daily News** reported that more than five thousand participated at the meeting held on 10 June 1923.³⁰ Instead of the word 'riot' Goonasinha used 'atrocities' to describe the events of 1915.³¹

Though there were differences of opinion with the Congress leadership, the League did not attempt to obstruct or hamper its work or to initiate a separate mass movement to promote its own ideals. The reason for this, according to Goonasinha, was his loyalty to the Congress.³²

The anti-poll tax³³ campaign was started by the League, as a non-violent resistance movement to the British rule. At the half yearly general meeting of the League which was held on 5 November 1921, Goonasinha proposed and W. H. M. Perera seconded a resolution urging that "commencing from the year 1922, no man liable under the Thoroughfare Ordinance and the Village Committee Ordinance should commute such labour by money payment until such time as the Poll-tax is abolished."³⁴ With a view of getting the tax abolished, the League made an appeal to all patriots to refrain from paying the tax, and called on them to work on roads instead, commencing from 20 April.³⁵ This decision was adopted unanimously at a meeting which was attended, according to one description by "a few rabid nationalists in cloth, shawl and banian, about 150 in number."³⁶

James Peiris showed no sympathy towards the work begun by the leaders to the League. In fact the League was particular to oppose him. The League protested against the conspiracies of the Congress leaders in favour of nominating James Peiris for the city of Colombo seat in 1920, and extended its support to nominate Arunachalam.³⁷ Goonasinha collected over a thousand signatures from the voters requesting Arunachalam to contest the seat.³⁸ However, its attempt failed, and James Peiris contested the seat with the support of the Congress. Since the League failed in its attempts to persuade Arunachalam to contest they attacked Peiris in his election campaign and sometimes they resorted to violence at his election meetings.³⁹ The members of the League for instance disrupted the meeting organised in February 1921, at Colombo in support of James Peiris.⁴⁰

The walk-out of the territorially elected members from the Legislative Council on the question of the proposed salaries scheme in 1922, was welcomed by the League.⁴¹ It started a widespread propaganda campaign on this occasion. A procession and a public meeting were organized and the League requested the residents of Colombo to illuminate their houses with lanterns.⁴² The procession drew large crowds and the cry for 'swaraj' rang

through the streets.⁴³ On the banners there were such slogans as 'hail, dawn of liberty', "patriots all prepare now for co-operation and boycott", "might is not right", "fear not to do the right". Goonasinha in his address stated that this occasion marked a new era in the political life of the country. He considered this as a suitable occasion to initiate a boycott movement and asserted, judging from the number of people who participated in the procession that the masses were with the League.

Yet, the League failed to sustain the movement. Goonasinha's attempts within the Congress to promote a radical approach was also a failure. Only five committee members of the Congress supported him when he suggested the boycott of the reforms granted by the Order-in-Council of 1924.⁴⁴ Though the League thought of initiating a movement on the model of Gandhi's boycott movement in India, it failed to launch any island wide propaganda campaign for the boycott of British goods.

The anti poll tax campaign was started by the League as a non-violent resistance movement to British rule. This tax was imposed in 1891 and all adult males had to pay 'poll-tax' of two rupees a year. Those who failed to pay the tax had to work on roads for six days. The League with a view of getting the tax abolished made an appeal to refrain from paying the tax and called on them to work on roads instead.⁴⁵ In 1922, the members of the League with the co-operation of several others led the campaign to work on roads. Twenty four men on the first day, and forty five on the second day participated in it.⁴⁶ The *Ceylon Independent* reported the campaign thus: "it is significant that this idea is receiving support. Judging from the number of people who are not members of the League, working at Quarry Road and at Price Park, it would appear that they believe that the poll-tax will be abolished."⁴⁷

However, the organizers failed to initiate an islandwide campaign and it was confined only to Colombo, Chilaw and Matara. Victor Corea who refused to pay the tax was sentenced to one month's rigorous imprisonment.⁴⁸ The League's campaign was partly responsible for the abolition of the tax in 1924.

Until the formation of militant trade union activities by Goonasinha, an interest in labour problems was taken by the Social Service Leagues. The leadership of these leagues was occupied by more "moderate" reform activists. The leading members of the Ceylon Workmen's Provident Union which was formed in 1931, were C. Batuwantudawa, D. C. Senanayake, Arthur V. Dias and Piyadasa Sirisena.⁴⁹ The Ceylon Social Service League begun by Arunachalam directed some attention to the conditions of the labour and this in 1920, led to the formation of the Ceylon Workers' Federation.⁵⁰ In the absence of a regular labour organization, the Federation was the only body that campaigned for certain democratic rights for the workers until 1923.

The moderate viewpoint prevailed in the Federation and, hence it failed to meet the pressing needs of the working class. The leaders of the Young Lanka League who were conscious of these circumstances, and who had intended to use strikes as one of the weapons in the march towards self-government, formed a separate organization on 10 September 1922, called the Ceylon Labour Union.⁵¹ Victor Corea became its president and A. E. Goonasinha the vice-president.

Within a few years the union grew in status and strength. In 1923, it had over 6,000 members.⁵² It started organizing branch associations throughout the island and in 1927, over 40,000 had enrolled as its members.

Unlike the Workers' Federation the Ceylon Labour Union started a struggle for an immediate increase of salaries, and for better living conditions for the workers. To obtain redress for their grievances, the union led a strike of Railway and Factory workers in February 1923.⁵³ and by March 1923, the strike spread to the private sector too.⁵⁴

By February 5, 170 persons had joined the strikes.⁵⁵ Apart from Colombo the strike spread to such local towns as Nawalapitiya and Kandy.⁵⁶ The leaders, it appears have attempted to rouse the

religious and national feelings of the labour population in order to strengthen their struggle. At the meetings of strikers Victor Corea related the heroic episodes of personalities like Madduma Banda.⁵⁷ Goonasinha, at the meeting held at Captain's Garden, in Colombo, urged the strikers to indicate their support for the strike by shouts of "Sadhu".⁵⁸ However, the strikes were settled by March as a result of the compromise between E. R. Tambimuttu and the Governor.⁵⁹

Due to the strike action the foreign and native capitalists were vehemently in opposition to the movement led by Goonasinha. The Chamber of Commerce in 1924, accused the leadership of the union of having misused funds collected during the strikes.⁶⁰ As it has been shown by Visaka Kumari Jayawardena, D. R. Wijewardene, the proprietor of the Lake House, one of the leading printing establishments in Colombo, was agitated against the formation of a Printers Union under the auspices of Goonasinha's union.⁶¹

The Ceylon Workers Federation kept aloof from the strikes and attempted to stop Goonasinha gaining popularity among the working population. D. B. Jayatilaka strongly condemned Goonasinha and charged him with directing workers into violent movements.⁶² At the meeting summoned by the Ceylon Workers Federation to discuss about strikes, Martinus C. Perera stated that the Federation should not advise the labourers to strike so long as constitutional means of redressing grievances were possible through newspapers.⁶³ Piyadasa Siriseana explained that the leaders of the labourers at the meeting and the supporters of Goonasinha hooted and jeered at the speakers of the Federation. Goonasinha challenged the Congress and the Unofficial members of the Legislative Council stating that the so-called leaders had done nothing for the workers.⁶⁴ He condemned the attitude of H.L. de Mel, a leading personality of the Low Country Planters Association, a member of the Ceylon National Congress and a landed proprietor, who refused to contribute anything when P. G. de Silva went round

collecting money to help the men who had struck work. Goonasinha emphatically stated that if the workmen had any enemies it was the Ceylon Workers' Federation.⁶⁵

With the growth of the Labour Union the League became a weaker body under Victor Corea. Personal disputes arose among the leading men of this body during the election held in 1924. E. T. de Silva and C. H. Z. Fernando, both aspired to wrest the Chilw seat from C. E. Corea.⁶⁶ Victor Corea who looked forward for his brother's victory attacked the latter two opponents. These disputes prevailed for some time and it interrupted the work of the League. Subsequently, this body joined with the Chilaw Association and endorsed its views which were submitted to the Donoughmore Commission.

The three years from 1928 to 1930 were the high water mark of Goonasinha's influence in the country's politics and in the trade union movement. During his visit to Great Britain he made a study of the political and trade union activities of the British Labour Party, and steps were taken after his return to Ceylon in 1928, to form the Ceylon Labour Party and the All-Ceylon Trade Union Congress.⁶⁷ Under these circumstances Goonasinha looked forward to link the temperance movement with the Labour Union activities. By 1928 the temperance activities were largely neglected by the inaugural members of the Colombo Total Abstinence Central Union. An attempt was made by him in 1928, to assist the Colombo Total Abstinence Union to popularise the temperance cause among the labour population.⁶⁸ The Colombo Total Abstinence Union at that time was a weaker body which confined its activities to Colombo. On the other hand the election campaign of 1931 and the Labour Union's activities became more important in 1930's. In fact Goonasinha failed to maintain his interest in temperance activities. The Young Lanka League, too, gradually declined in significance.

Immediately before the election of 1924, an association by the name Gandhi Sangam was formed by a group of radicals in

Colombo.⁶⁹ Goonasinha became one of its Vice-Presidents and the Sangam proclaimed its intention of bringing about the adoption of Gandhism as a practising doctrine throughout the island. However, the immediate motive was to win the Colombo North seat for one of its associates. In fact all the members of this association were residents of Colombo. After the election the Sangham gradually disappeared from the political scene.

The link between politics and religion was an important factor in the period from 1880 to 1915. Majority of the organizations that emerged during this period were educational and temperance associations. The agitation for constitutional reforms was confined to a few associations. It is seen from the above discussion that the Young Lanka League had its links with the religio-cultural movements at the beginning and then entered into the secular politics. As in the case of few political organizations of the time, the activities of the League were confined to Colombo. The only semblance of a mass organization found its base not in direct political agitation but indirectly in cultural activities and temperance movements.

The radical nationalism of A. E. Goonesingha and the Young Lanka League was largely influenced by Gandhian ideals and the activities of the Indian National Congress against the imperial administration of India. The pressure vested on the agitation for constitutional reforms was weakened with the implementation of the Donoughmore Constitution. Some of the leading political leaders of the time entered the State Council as elected members. Meanwhile, the emergence of the leftist movement in Sri Lanka in 1930's was a major cause for the decay of the first radical generations like the Young Lanka League. Their contribution to the development of the nationalist movement in Sri Lanka was the introduction of the techniques of mass politics and the tactics of agitation based on the politicising of the urban class of Colombo.

Foot-Notes

1. Michael Roberts., "Elite, Nationalism and Nationalist movement in British Ceylon" in Documents of **The Ceylon National Congress and National politics in Ceylon 1929,1950**, Vol. 1 Colombo, Dept of National Archives, 1978. Ralph Pieris., "New Elites in Ceylon,". Transactions of the fifth world Congress of Sociology Louvian, 1969. Marshall. R. Singer., "The Emerging Elite" A study of political leadership in Ceylon" Massachusette, 1984.
2. Jayawardena, V. K., **The Rise of the Labour Movement in Ceylon** Durham. Duke University press. 1972.
3. **Young Lanka**, Vol, I. No. 1, pp. 3-5.
4. **Dhamaraja College Magazine**, Vol. IV. No. I, 1915, pp 24-25; also De Silva, P. W. D. , **Goonasingha Weeraya**, 1930. p. 4.
5. **Ferguson's Ceylon Directory**, 1913-14, p 1124.
6. De Silva, P. W. D. , **Goonasingha Weeraya**, p. 7, **op cit**; also Goonasingha, A. E. , "My Life and Labour", **Ceylon Observer**, 4 July 1965.
7. **Ferguson's Ceylon Directiry**, 1913-14, p. 943; 1917, p. 124.
8. By 1920, several educated Tamils and C. E. Corea, Victor Corea, W. C. Udugama, R. E. Ranasinghe, H. James Souza Joined the League as members.
9. This name was given to this school to honour Governor Anderson for his good administration. **Young Lanka**, Vol. II, 1919, No. 2, p, 21; De Silva, P. W. D. , **op. cit.**, pp 5-6.
10. **Ceylon Independent**, 9 Oct 1920; **Young Lanka.**, 19 Feb. 1920. in 1921 there were two lady members enrolled in the league as members. **Ceylon Independent**, 2 Feb. 1921.
11. **Young Lanka**, Vol. I, July 1918, No 1, p. 3.
12. **Ibid.**, Vol. II, 1919, No. 2, pp. 43-44.
13. **Ibid.**, Vol. II, 1919, No. 1, p. 2.
14. **Ceylon Independent**, 4 Feb, 1919.
15. **Young Lanka**, Vol. I, 1918, No. 1.
16. **National Monthly**, Vol. III. Feb-March 1914, Nos, 2&3, pp. 56-57.
17. **Young Lanka**, Vol. II, 1919, No. 4, p. 62.

18. The first intimation of Governor Manning's proposals regarding the next instalment of constitutional changes in Ceylon was made on 30 June 1919. The Ceylon National Congress despatched two deputations to England with a view of placing their demands before the Colonial Office. **Ibid**, Vol. II, 1919, No. 1. p. 5. Bandaranaike, S. W. R. D. (ed). **The Handbook of the Ceylon National Congress 1919-1928**, Colombo. 1918, p. 302.
19. **Ibid.**, vol. II, March 1920, No. 9, p. 158.
20. **Ceylon Daily News**, (CDN), 8 October 1920.
21. **Ceylon Independent**, 13 Dec. 1919.
22. **Ibid.**, 18 Oct. 1920. **CDN**, 8 Oct. 1920.
23. **CDN.**, 8 Oct. 1920.
24. **Ceylon Independent.**, 28 Oct. 1920 ; 10 Sept. 1920.
25. See above p. 115.
26. **Ceylon Independent**, 9 Oct. 1920.
27. **Ibid.**, 27 May, 1921.
28. **Ibid.**, 27 May, 1921.
29. **Ibid.**, 19 May, 1922 ; **CDN.**, 11 June 1923.
30. **CDN.**, 16 March 1921.
31. **Ibid.**,
32. **CDN.**, 16 March 1921.
33. By an ordinance passed in 1891, all adult males who did not pay "Poll-Tax" of two rupees a year had to work on roads for six days.
34. **Ceylon Independent**, 7 Nov. 1921.
35. **Ibid.**, 1 April 1922.
36. **ibid.**,
37. **Ceylon Independent**. 23 Feb. 1921.
38. **Ibid.**, 17 Dec. 1921.
39. The Unofficials C. E. Corea, H. L. de. Mel, W. M. Rajapaksa, Rev. W. E. Boteju, S. D. Krishnaratne, A. C. G. Wijekoon, E. W. Perera, Allan Driberg, E. R. Tambimuttu, W. Duraiswamy, and E. G. Adamaly headed

by James Peiris walked out from the Legislative Council, on protest. Handbook of the **Ceylon National Congress**, p 403 ; **Ceylon Independent**. 2Oct 1922.

40. **CDN.**, 18 Feb. 1921.
41. See above p. 194.
42. **Ceylon Independent**, 5 Oct. 1922.
43. **Ibid.**
44. **CDN.**, 25 Feb. 1924.
45. **Ceylon Independent**. 7 Nov. 1921.
46. **Ibid.**, 22 April. 1922.
47. Among persons who participated were an editor of a weekly, a sub-editor of a vernacular paper, a school master, a matriculation student, a merchant, a clerk and others to whom the payment of two rupees was a small matter. **Ibid.**
48. **CDN.**, 2 May. 1922
49. **Sinhala Tharunaya**, Vol. 2, March 1913, No. 3, p. 46.
50. **Ceylon Independent**, 3 April 1921; **Sinhala Bauddhya**, 29 Jan. 1929. See also Jayawardena, V. K., **The Rise of the Labour Movement in Ceylon**, op. cit., pp 210-213.
51. **CDN.**, 3 Dec. 1923.
52. Evidence of the Labour Union before the **S. C. C. C.** , Vol. 3, p 28.
53. **CDN** ,. 3 Dec. 1923.
54. **Ibid.**, 14 March 1923.
55. **Ibid.**, 2 Feb. 1923.
56. **Ibid.**,. 6 March. 1923.
57. **Ibid.**,. 26 Feb. 1923
58. **Ibid.**,. 26 Feb. 1923.
59. **Ibid.**, 23 March. 1923.
60. **Ibid.**,. 23 Feb. 1924.

61. Jayawardena, V. K., **The Rise of the Labour Movement in Ceylon**, op. cit., p. 323; The Printers Union was formed by Goonasingha, in 1923 **CDN.**, 27 1920.
62. **CDN.**, 20 Feb. 1923.
63. **Ibid.**, 20 Feb. 1923.
64. **Ibid.**, 12 March. 1923.
65. **Ibid.**
66. **Ibid.**, 29 March. 1923.
67. **UHC.**, Vol. III, p. 496.
68. **Sisi Resa**, 15 Sept. 1928.
69. **Ibid.**, 20 March 1924, 25 June 1924. The president of the Gandhi Sangam in 1924 was W. E. V. Ratnam. **Ferguson's Ceylon Directory**, 1924, p. 914.