

By UDITHA DEVAPRIYA

“The architecture of the Ceylonese order at Independence had two pillars. One, the UNP built by D. S. Senanayake. The other, Lake House, built by D. R. Wijewardene.”

Dayan Jayatilaka

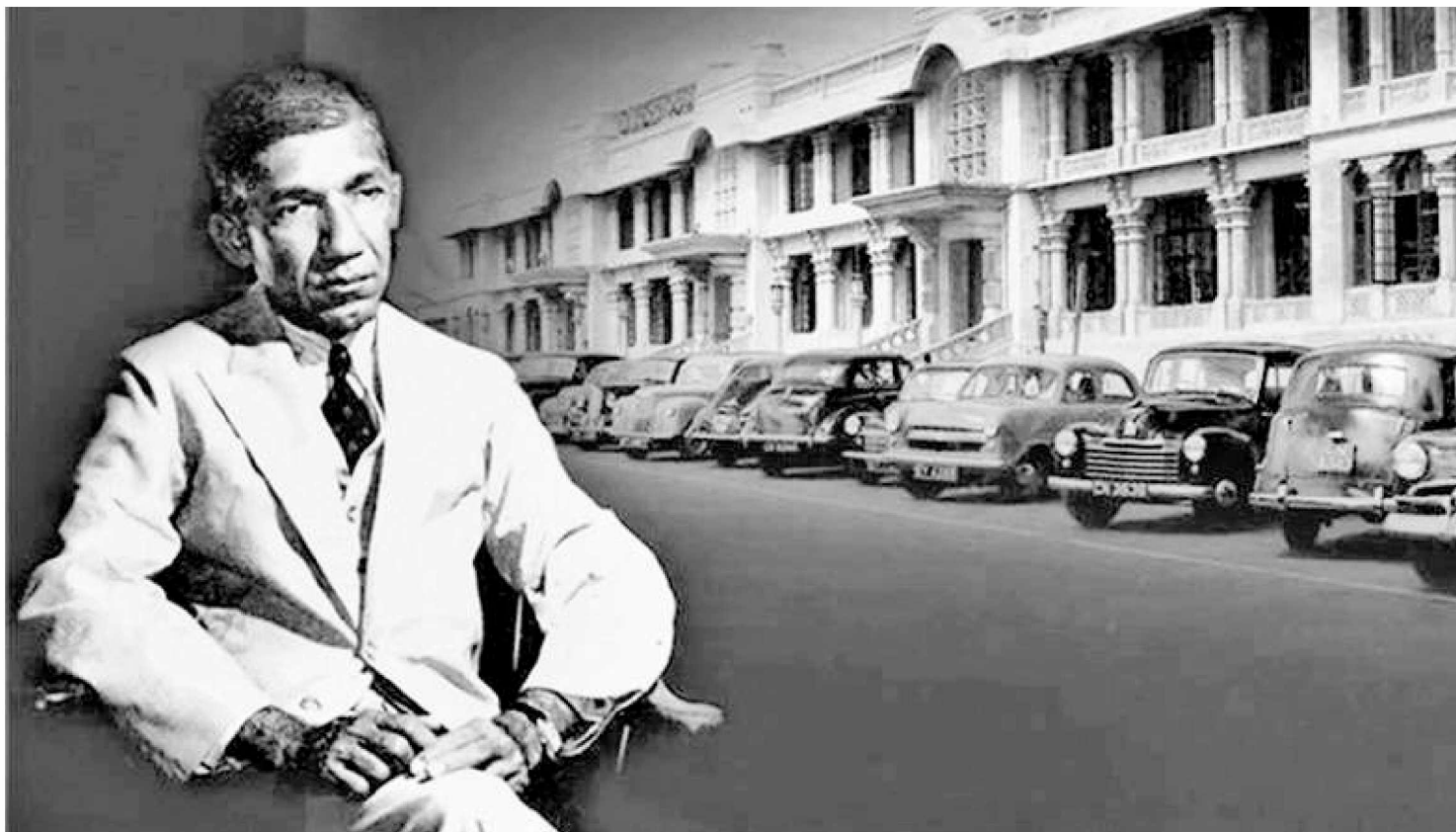
The history of the press in Sri Lanka predates the British period. The Dutch government saw it as a tool for conversion, for disseminating Christian propaganda. The Evangelical groups that entered the country during British rule viewed it along similar lines. For the British government and its critics, however, it became a moulder and shaper of public opinion, a conduit for the transmission of Western political and economic thinking. If managed well, the press could be used to reinforce the authority of the State.

Yet by the time of the Colebrooke-Cameron Commission, which recommended the printing of newspapers, the press had become a counterweight to the government. The result was that by the late 19th century, newspapers turned into a rallying point for the urban middle-classes, especially those engaged in the professions.

The middle-classes were critical of government policies, and they articulated these criticisms sharply and with much clarity during periods of crisis, such as during the 1848 Matale Rebellion. Even though their radicalism was shaped and influenced by British liberalism and the Enlightenment and did not really challenge the validity of British rule, these groups became important disseminators of radical thought in British Ceylon.

Newspapers, particularly English newspapers, played an important role in all that. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were 13 English newspapers in Ceylon, and several others in Sinhala and Tamil. None of these was as supportive of the government as the government would have wanted them to be. Indeed, as K. K. S. Perera has noted, the first newspaper published under the patronage of the colonial State, the Colombo Journal, was discontinued a year into publication because it criticised the government.

When D. R. Wijewardene launched the Ceylon Daily News in January 1918, a number of developments had made it incumbent on the social class and economic interests he represented to take ownership of the press in Ceylon.



D. R. Wijewardene and the Ceylonese Press

First, it had been three years since the Sinhala-Muslim riots, an event that degraded the British government in the eyes of the colonial bourgeoisie. While the riots had spread out of control and thus called for restraint, the State's deployment of military force was seen as excessive and illegal. More than anything, it led to a rupture between the bourgeoisie and the government. The bourgeoisie saw the government as a hindrance to their economic interests and their aim of self-government within a limited constitutional framework. The government saw the bourgeoisie as a class of radical revolutionaries, no different to the anti-imperialist groups being formed in neighbouring India.

Second, the radical, progressive intelligentsia of the 19th century were fast becoming conservative in the early part of the 20th. These

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included a section of the Burgher middle-class. The predominantly Sinhalese and Christian colonial bourgeoisie, who had been degraded as nobodies wanting to become somebodies by the older elite, became the new radicals, though as has been

pointed out their radicalism was limited to British liberalism and ideas of the European Enlightenment. For a while, they dominated discussions on self-government and reforms. At the same time, while they clashed with colonial officials, they did not imagine a British Ceylon falling outside of the Empire. They were reformists who, in E. W. Perera's felicitous phrasing, preferred evolution to revolution.

Third, the Buddhist Revival of the 19th century had made it possible, rather ironically, to question British rule without undermining it. As Kumari Jayawardena has pointed out, in Sri Lanka expressions of cultural national-

ism preceded and triumphed over political radicalism, at least until the formation of a radical Left in the 1930s. The likes of D. R. Wijewardene played a pivotal role here. Through newspapers and the print media,

they disseminated the spirit of revivalism among the masses. While earlier newspapers had been limited to an upper middle-class – and to themes and topics that interested them, like tax reform – the new print media thus opened itself up to a broader audience.

In short, the new Sinhala and English press in early 20th century Sri Lanka revealed both the strengths and the weaknesses of the colonial bourgeoisie. To say that is not necessarily to denigrate the bourgeoisie; merely to understand why they acted and thought the way they did in relation to important political issues, such as self-rule in Ceylon. They were, not to put too fine a point, a product of their time, reflective of their era.

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Wijewardene represented a different ideology – not Ceylonese liberalism, but Ceylonese nationalism: inclusive, open to and welcoming of constitutional reform, but opposed to Marxism and other forms of political radicalism.

Within this limited framework, Wijewardene's contribution was significant, if extensive. By the time he set up the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd in 1926 – he had turned 40 – the upheavals and shifts of public opinion in Sri Lanka had made the founding of such an institution not only inevitable, but also imperative. While being conscious of the limits of the elite Wijewardene represented, it is thus necessary that we appreciate their contribution, the work they did but also, in a way, left undone. It is in that broader context that we must base any assessment of the establishment of the ANCL in British Ceylon.

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