

Sri Lanka: Women's Brigade of Suriyamal Fame:Marxist Independence Struggle in the 30s/40s

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The South Colombo Youth League [Marxist] got involved in the Suriyamal Movement and revived it on a new anti-imperialist and anti-war basis. Yearly until the Second World War, young women sold Suriya flowers on the streets on Armistice Day in competition with the 'imperialists' Poppy sellers.

Caroline Gunawardena Anthony Pillai was the wife of SCC Anthony Pillai. Caroline was a pioneer in many ways. Anthony [Tony] felt he had the makings of a good trade unionist but needed to know Sinhalese. Philip Gunawardena suggested he take lessons from Philip's sister, Caroline. She taught Sinhala to Anthony, and she joined the labor movement before they fell in love and married in 1939.

Drawn into the movement by her fiery elder brothers, Harry, Philip and Robert, she participated in the Ceylonese nationalist movement of the early 30s and helped launch the LSSP in 1935. An activist in her own right, she was lauded as a "leading light of the leftist movement" in Madras where Caroline joined her husband in Madurai, India, where they continued their path of resistance to the British.

During the World War II, Caroline worked in a subversive Trotskyist party in India along with Anthony Pillai. Tony went underground in Madurai, but was arrested in March 1947 and Caroline took over the task of addressing public meetings. When Tony died in 2000, Caroline returned to live with her children in Boralugoda.

Florence Mendis Senanayake (b.1903) became Ceylon's first woman MP. In 1925 she married Reginald Senanayake, later a founding member of the LSSP. Florence was elected at the first parliamentary elections in 1947 as the Member for Kiriella.

Kusumsiri (Kusuma) Gunawardena was born in Tangalle in 1912. She was educated at Musaeus College, and later participated in the Suriya Mal movement and joined the LSSP. On June 30, 1939 she married Philip, one of the founders of the LSSP. During the Second World War, when her husband broke jail and escaped to India, she followed in disguise. They were both later arrested by Indian police in 1943 and after several months deported back to Ceylon. In 1947 Phillip Gunawardene, MP was unseated due to his involvement in the General Strike in 1947. He was succeeded by Kusuma, elected unopposed in the by-election.

Vivienne Violet Goonewardene (Vivi) born in September 1916, was a niece of Philip involved in Suriyamal and anti-colonial activism. A key figure in both the Indian independence movement and the Sri Lankan independence movement she was a visible (and voluble) presence in Post-Independence Ceylon and later Sri Lanka.. She fought against perceived injustices being one of the Left's most vibrant personalities. With the beginning of the Second World War, with husband Leslie

who escaped from prison she fled to India under a false name and immersed herself in the Quit India Movement. Uncle Robert helped her pursue an external degree at the University of London before continuing to secretly attend political rallies in the company of her Aunt Caroline.

Selina Margaret Peiris was a founding member of the LSSP. Born to a wealthy family in Badulla, she completed secondary education at the Musaeus College and entered Colombo University College and graduated. She entered politics with the South Colombo Youth League and became active in local politics along with Philip. She too was active in the Suriya Mal movement and the malaria relief program when she met the London returned Dr N. M. Perera. She was elected to the LSSP central committee and served as its treasurer and married NM in March 1936. Selina graduated with a BA degree in Sanskrit and Pali in June 1939. she made her way to the United States linking up with the Socialist Workers Party, in hope of traveling to Mexico to meet Trotsky. In June 1940, when several party leaders including NM were arrested, the LSSP responded with large protest march which was baton charged. Selina was arrested and jailed. Divorced from NM she opted to live in India, working as an English teacher until her death.

‘Sudda’ women in Lankan politics

European women from various backgrounds radicalized in the modern political events that swept Europe were in Ceylon in early 21st Century. Five such women were: Doreen Young (Wickremasinghe), Edith Gyomroi (Ludowyk), Heidi Simon (Keuneman), Maud Rogerson (Keuneman) and Jeanne Hoban (Moonesinghe). All of these women were married to Sri Lankan Marxists. Thus their personal relationships for the large part explained their presence in the political scene here.

They were not just ‘political wives’ but convinced activists in left wing politics in this country at that time which probably influenced their marriages.

Doreen Young, a British leftist born in February 1907, became a prominent Communist politician in Sri Lanka. As a student in London in the 1920s, she was active in anti-imperialist work in Britain through Indian Independence League where she met Dr SA Wickramasinghe, a radical Communist and a post-graduate student in London. They returned to SL and got married.

In 1933 Doreen wrote an article titled “The Battle of the Flowers” (Poppy vs. Suriyamal) published in the Ceylon Daily News. She criticized the practice of forcing Sri Lankan schoolchildren to purchase poppies to help British war veterans at the expense of their own people attracting fire from British colonialists in then Ceylon. Doreen was elected the first president of the Suriya Mal movement. She became the principal of Ananda Balika Vidyalaya, but was removed in 1936 suspected of anti-British activity in the school. In 1952 she was elected to Parliament as Communist Party candidate for the Akuressa seat [beating C. Wijesinghe of the UNP] at a by-election which followed her husband’s unseating by an election petition.

Edith Ujvari Ludowyk was a psychoanalyst and was giving classes in psychology and psychoanalysis to a few young men of the LSSP. She did the secretarial work in the women’s section of the LSSP contributing to the British-owned Times of Ceylon. In 1938, when Horthy’s fascist regime passed its first Anti-Jewish Law, she migrated to Sri Lanka with her third husband, a journalist Ujvári, who died in 1940. She later met and married EFC Ludowyk, Professor of English at the University College, Colombo and joined the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party.

Hedi & Maud Keuneman [Hedi, first wife of Pieter] a member of the British Communist Party spent only five years in Ceylon. Maud Keuneman [second wife] edited the Communist Party’s weekly English language journal ‘Forward’ for close upon two decades. Her husband Pieter was the General Secretary of the Communist Party during this time. Pieter’s third wife Ouida was not involved in

politics.

Jeanne Moonesinghe abandoned her studies at the London School of Economics and followed her husband Anil to Sri Lanka, but did not directly pursue a career in politics though, involved in the Lanka Estate Workers' Union. She worked as a journalist on the Observer.

By 1947 the left was already ideologically split three ways. Irrespective of the differences, they had agreed to work together on common issues. This prompted the women of the LSSP, the Bolshevik Leninists and the CP together with some who were not directly identified with any of the above named mainstream left parties to come together to form the Eksath Kantha Peramuna (EKP). This remarkable women's front thus heralded a possible autonomous Socialist Feminist Movement for the future.

The leading women of this group were Doreen Wickremasinghe, Vivienne Goonewardena, Edith Ludowyk, Vimala Wijewardene, Parameswari Kandiah, Mrs. M.V.P. Peiris, Mrs. Vaikunthavasam, Shirani Jayawardene, Jeanne Pinto, Irangani Meedeniya -former Times journalist [Irangani Serasinghe—the only surviving member], Cora Abraham and Helen Gunasekara. They defined themselves as a socialist organization and went on to assert that they stood for changes in the fundamental structure of society.

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