

# SELINA PERERA - the Forgotten Socialist Militant

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## Background

The great political misfortune of Sri Lanka has been that her people were unable to generate a mass movement for national freedom despite nearly 150 years of direct British rule. The British occupation was preceded by virtually 300 years of Portuguese and Dutch rule over large parts of the country, especially the coastal regions. Yet we were unable to replicate the experience of popular struggle against colonial domination that established a pantheon of national heroes and heroines as in India, Vietnam and Indonesia. The absence of a national movement opened the way for the advancement of partial aims. Class, caste and ethnicity acquired currency as pre-eminent social objectives.

The formation of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party towards the end of 1935 constituted the nearest approximation to the emergence of a militant anti-colonial movement in Sri Lanka. Turning its back on the politics of supplicating the local Governor and the Colonial Office in London for concessional doses of administrative responsibility, the new party called for a popular uprising to drive the British out, based on the working people of town and countryside. The heat and light for this upsurge was brilliantly provided by the conversion of the elected State Council into a battleground on which no quarter was given to opponents both white and brown.

When the Second World War broke out in 1939 it soon became obvious that the campaign against the British had to find a new theatre of war beyond the legislative chamber. The tea plantations in the hill country appeared as a proximate venue when a wave of militant strikes struck fear in the hearts of British planterdom. The colonial regime hit back at the local trouble-makers. The conflict was transformed from the force of argument to the argument of force. Harsh and comprehensive repression soon made it impossible to aim meaningful blows at the colonial regime. A British admiral was installed with virtually unlimited powers over the local scene. Later Kandy became the staff headquarters of the British South-East Asia Command. When the Japanese staged air raids over Colombo and Trincomalee and the LSSP spirited its detained leaders away from the prison in which they were kept, it became very clear that effective politics would have to be shifted to new ground.

Thus began the wartime emigration of leading LSSP cadres to the Indian sub-continent. The number of those involved in this emigration must have been about twenty. Many more were already in prison or precariously evading arrest outside. Among the emigres were four women: Selina Perera, Vivienne Goonewardene, Caroline Anthonypillai nee Gunawardena and Kusuma Gunawardena. The recent death of Vivienne Goonewardene has awakened interest in the part they played in what is perhaps one of the few significant episodes in the modern political history of Sri Lanka. Of these four

only one of them is as yet alive, Caroline Anthonypillai (Caro to her friends, relations and admirers). She is Philip Gunawardena's sister but few people know anything about her, partly because she settled with her husband and family in Madras ever since she emigrated to India. But in her time she was one of the militants of the LSSP.

## Young Selina

Selina Perera was the most senior of the four women. Born in 1909 as Selina Peiris, her father belonged to an influential Buddhist family that had settled in Badulla, while her mother came from Nugegoda. She had a step-brother from an earlier marriage of her father and a younger brother who were both prominent in local politics. Both she and her sisters began their schooling at the Catholic Convent in Badulla, but were influenced by protestant moral codes prevalent among the more affluent Buddhist families at the time. An interview with Selina's sister, Sundari de Mel, reflects the disturbing impact on young people's consciousness of paternal self-will. The following quotation from a researcher reveals the extent of Selina's resourcefulness and her readiness to defy irritant authority:

This was a time when short frocks were the fashion. But father banned them totally. He got us very long frocks. We were shy to wear these long unfashionable frocks. But Selina had an idea. Father, being a stickler for punctuality, used to send us to school early in his car. Selina suggested taking thread and needless with us and using the time we had at our disposal before school started to shorten the frocks. One day we forgot the routine of lengthening them, and when we got down from the car father caught us and burnt all our frocks. We did not attend school for some time. The school authorities started enquiring why we were not at school. We came to a compromise with father who agreed to short frocks, but not above the knees.

Even Protestant Buddhism desired the best in English education for its daughters, with the proviso that it should be combined with the teaching of Buddhist precepts, Sri Lankan history and the Sinhala language. Selina and her sisters were sent to Musaeus College, Colombo, which was the premier Buddhist Girls' school at the time, and admitted to the school boarding. That the school moulded her personality is evident from the interest in Pali and Sanskrit which she offered as subjects for a London University degree on her first visit to the U.K., from which she returned in 1935. She joined the Suriya Mal movement and, when the LSSP was formed in December 1935, became one of its founding members. She was 26 years old at the time.

Selina played an active role in the general election to the State Council of 1936, which returned the first Samasamajists, Philip

Gunawardena and N.M.Perera, as members of that parliament. She was particularly involved in the Ruwanwella election where NM was a candidate. She married NM shortly after the election.

### Attempted Visit to Trotsky

**I**n 1938 Selina went to the U.K. a second time and stayed on until the outbreak of the second world war in 1939. She worked actively with Trotskyist groups in Britain and formed connections with the American Trotskyists. The war made it necessary for her to return to Sri Lanka without delay and she decided to travel to Colombo via New York. She spent a month in New York (November-December 1939) and intended to travel to Mexico in order to have a meeting with Trotsky. The American Trotskyists encouraged her in this and made the necessary arrangements for her to get to Mexico.

To her great disappointment, the immigration authorities at Laredo, on the US-Mexican border, refused to permit her entry into Mexico without a special permit from the Tourist Agency in Mexico City. This was a new wartime regulation applying to all British subjects. The Mexican Consulate in New York had granted her a Mexican Visa without advising her of the new regulation. In a letter to James P, Cannon, General-Secretary of the Socialist Workers' Party of the U.S.A., Selina wrote that she could not wait for the Mexican "special permit", because she had to catch her boat to Colombo from San Francisco on 20th December, 1939. Selina had earlier written to Trotsky in Mexico on the question of the likely involvement of the Red Army in the bordering countries of Asia, in the event of the USSR's involvement in the world war. Trotsky replied to her in December 1939 pointing out that there was a danger in raising hypothetical issues. The main task in India was to overthrow British imperialism. The letter concluded "With warmest greetings to yourself and to the Ceylon comrades, and with best wishes for your trip."

### Strikes in Sri Lanka

**B**y the time Selina returned to Sri Lanka some radical changes had taken place in the LSSP. The Central Committee of the party had passed a resolution declaring its lack of confidence in the Third Communist International with its headquarters in Moscow. This would not have surprised her because she had already known about the formation of the Fourth International one year earlier and had worked with its groups in London and New York. The party itself was being re-organised as a cadre party the more effectively to participate in the new events that were unfolding. A wave of spontaneous strike actions was spreading in the plantations and the LSSP's Lanka Estate Workers' Union was increasingly finding itself at the head. The Government struck back at the LSSP by arresting and detaining its principal leaders. A meeting was called at Price Park to protest the Government's action and was held despite a police ban. The police broke up the meeting and arrested eleven of its leaders and framed charges against them in court. Most prominent among those arrested was Selina Perera.

From this time on Selina became the principal mass figure around whom the open activity of the party was organised and developed. With the arrest of Philip Gunawardena, N.M.Perera, Colvin R. de Silva and Edmund Samarakkody, the strike wave on the tea plantations ebbed rapidly. But a new wave of trade union organisation and strike action began in Colombo. This was coordinated and guided principally by S.C.C.Anthonypillai, husband of Caroline. Selina played an important part in it, addressing meetings and heading the picketline. She was always an inspiration of militancy. On one occasion, during a strike at the Rothman's cigarette company, a police inspector grasped her arm to pull her out of the picketline. She retaliated with a slap across his face saying: "that should teach you not to lay hands on a woman."

### Exile in India

**A**bout the middle of 1941 the party was informed that the Government was seeking to arrest her. The decision was taken to keep her in hiding for some time. But this became permanent with the escape of the detainees in April 1942 when Selina was among those who were proclaimed as wanted offenders. She was taken in disguise across the Palk Straits to Bombay in the course of that year. When Selina arrived in Bombay there were already quite a few fugitives from Sri Lanka in residence there. Philip Gunawardena and his wife, Kusuma; Leslie and Vivienne Goonewardene; N.M.Perera; Bernard Soysa; Robert Gunawardena, for instance. Such a concentration of LSSP personalities and leadership talents made it inevitable that any organisation in Bombay of the BLPI would bear a heavy impress of Sri Lankan Left politics. This was not only a disadvantage from the angle of the work that had to be done, but also a source of danger to those involved. It was bound to become known to the Bombay police at some stage or other. This seemed particularly likely in view of the lack of adequate trained cadre recruited from the local community. The local base of the BLPI in Bombay was provided by a group that called itself the Bolshevik Mazdoor Party. It had a small membership in one or two towns in Gujarat and a handful of youth in Bombay city. The Sri Lankan fugitives found themselves compelled to take considerable risks to find the minimum personnel needed. They found a relatively rewarding recruiting ground among the members of M.N. Roy's Radical Democratic Party which was going through something of a crisis on account of its official policy of unreserved collaboration in the war effort with the Viceregal government in New Delhi. These former Royists were the real sinews of the BLPI in Bombay. They count among the staunchest of Trotskyists to this day.

In this situation, there was very little in the way of political organisation that Selina Perera or Vivienne Goonewardene or Kusuma Gunawardena could do. Kusuma gave birth to a son in Bombay, Indika Gunawardena. She had many domestic chores to perform and these were not easy in conditions of fugitive existence. In Kusuma's case, it may even be said, that problems of revolutionary ideology were not the immediate priority.

In the case of Vivienne Goonewardene, she too had an infant daughter to tend and befriend. Fortunately, she had an old Sinhala lady who had been specially selected and brought from Sri Lanka to

assist her. The old lady understood nothing of her employers' background or of what was going on in the house. Leslie Goonewardene's ground-floor flat in Matunga, which had a very considerable South Indian middle-class population, was in fact the headquarters of the entire BLPI organisation and had a certain amount of inevitable routine. There were callers who had to be received and discussions, both long and short, that had to be accommodated. Her household and, quite often, guests had to be fed and it fell on her to do the cooking. To provide for all this and protect the immunity of her home, as well as the anonymity of its members, became her main function.

Selina's marriage to NM appeared to have gathered problems and she found accommodation in the house of a Muslim academic who had been introduced by Congress supporters who willingly offered material help in the face of difficulty. NM had to support himself by initially working as a clerk in a bookshop in Hornby Road on a salary of fifty rupees a month. But before long he was able to locate old friends of his student years in London, who were able to fix him up as Secretary of a new Discount Bank in Bombay, disguised as Dr. Vishvanath. When this identity appeared in peril, the same friends arranged for him a post of Lecturer in a commercial college affiliated to the Ahmedabad University. It was here that the Police arrested him.

Despite organisational handicaps, the BLPI was able to conduct some amount of propaganda for its transitional programme and to initiate the work of preparing a much needed party cadre. But the more it expanded its areas of activity the more it exposed its organisation to police attack. 1942 and 1943 were critical years for the British, not only in India but also in Asia generally where the Japanese armed forces were advancing. In India itself the Quit India insurgency had been contained. But the Government of India was politically completely isolated and rested on the shoulders of the communal and communist parties. It was clearer than ever before that the British would have to quit India once the war had come to an end. But this only intensified the repression of the people.

### Escaping the Police

In July 1943 the police were able to arrest some of the Sri Lankans in Bombay and deport them to Colombo. Philip Gunawardena and N.M.Perera were among them and, later, Bernard Soysa and Robert Gunawardena. Many others were also arrested and imprisoned at the same time and the Bombay organisation was gravely weakened. Colvin R.de Silva, Leslie and Vivienne Gunawardena and Selina Perera had a miraculous escape. They eventually wound up in Calcutta, where the BLPI headquarters was now located. But there was a great difference between the former Bombay headquarters and the new Calcutta office. It was no longer party centre that was dominated by Sri Lankan cadres who, despite themselves, could not help imparting a degree of abstraction to its politics brought about by the lack of immediate roots in India. For one thing, political life in Bengal has always been distinguished by the proliferation of numerous sects. Fashionable and unfashionable ideas, ahead of the time or behind it, have never failed to find representation in the sentimental intellectuality of Calcutta. It was

not, therefore, strange for the Fourth International to shoot up where such organisations abounded. In fact, there were at least two organisations, that of the Revolutionary Communist Party of Soumyendranath Tagore and the Revolutionary Socialist Party that sported outlooks and programmes quite close to those of the Fourth International. But, precisely for that reason, it was wholly unrealistic to expect that one or both of them could accommodate a newcomer within existing organisational confines.

### Politics in Calcutta

Both Leslie Goonewardene and Colvin R.de Silva, together with Vivienne and Selina, found more congenial surroundings in Calcutta. The local group was not the kind of wide-eyed following collected round an introvert leader, as in the case of Bombay or Kanpur. Its Trotskyism had been acquired under urbane intellectual guidance provided by a Bengali Trotskyist leader in Britain (Ajit Roy) and his accomplished journalist associate in Calcutta (Kamalesh Bannerjee). The Sri Lankans were able to put their practical experience at the service of the young group in Bengal. Before long an effective student and trade union leadership in the name of the BLPI was able to project itself both in Calcutta and outside. But what was far more valuable was the magnitude and depth of the historic events that were shaking the fabric of Bengali society. An unthinkable surgical operation was being performed on the living body of one of the major nationalities of the world with an unrivalled cultural heritage, Bengal was being cut up into Hindu and Muslim countries to the accompaniment of human carnage and migration of unheard of proportions. Even in Calcutta Hindus and Muslims were at each other's throats and individual existence was in severest peril. This was a direct experience of mass politics, but of the most degrading kind. It had an integrative impact even on complete outsiders, thrusting them into a general melee out of which new social identities would emerge.

All over India the concluding years of the war and the first few years of peace were years of deep turmoil. But in Sri Lanka they were preparing for the election of a new parliament. The political prisoners were released and the arrest warrants still outstanding were cancelled. This had immediate impact on the Sri Lankan fugitives in India. Vivienne was one of the earliest to return with her little daughter. There was a debate among Indian members of the BLPI whether Colvin should be requested to practise his profession in India so as to participate in the mainstream of politics in India, but it was not seriously considered. The decision at a conference of delegates of the BLPI in India to dissolve the Indian party and enter the Socialist Party was taken in 1947. The proposal was opposed by the majority of Sri Lankan leading members, including Selina. It was, however, supported by S.C.C.Anthonypillai and Hector Abhayavardhana.

For Selina the decision to dissolve the BLPI was a cruel blow. She had identified herself completely with the Bengal party, the bulk of whom also fought hard to continue with the BLPI formation. Selina had to join the Socialist Party with a minority of Bengal Trotskyists, but with the advantage of Ajit Roy's presence along with her. But the Socialist Party itself proved to be in an unstable condition.

Before long Jaiprakash Narain announced his retirement from politics and his gravitation to Bhoodan, the movement for donations of land led by Acharya Vinoba Bhave. Some other leaders also defected from the SP and there was a split in the direction of a more militant programme led by Dr. Rammanohar Lohia. Selina supported this split along with most other former BLPI members. Later the Communist Party which was wholly aligned with Moscow found itself splitting on the question of Moscow's divergences from Peking. Even so the mainstream of Indian politics continued to flow in the direction determined by the Congress Party. Both Socialists and Communists continued to be only exponents of partial Indian interests: the Socialists expounding a strategy of inciting caste

discontent in the country and Communists seeking to consolidate a partial nationalism in West Bengal and Kerala.

In Calcutta Selina found it virtually impossible to identify herself with any of the political currents that were struggling to survive. She had set her face against returning to politics in Sri Lanka for personal reasons and made a living teaching English in Calcutta. She was known there as Sheela Perera and participated in political and trade union actions of the Left. She lived austere in Ganesh Chandra avenue in the heart of Calcutta, occasionally having visitors from Sri Lanka. Except for one visit she did not return to live in Sri Lanka, dying aged 77 in June 1986. Before her death she made a final political statement, leaving her property in Sri Lanka to the LSSP. ■

## SISTERS IN ARMS: THE *EKSATH KANTHA PERAMUNA*

Neloufer de Mel & Ramani Muttetuwegama

There has been a long tradition in Sri Lanka of women's participation in the country's political movements. The antecedents of such participation date from historical times, including to queens Anula Devi, Lilavati and Sugala who led their armies into battle. In modern Sri Lanka, women, having received a modern education through both Christian and Buddhist missionary schools, were in professional spheres by the turn of the 20th century. Their presence was felt in the medical and teaching professions, vocational schools and electoral politics.

Such an emergence of women went hand in hand with a burgeoning political consciousness. This was initially seen amongst the middle-class to which these women essentially belonged and was tied to the various anti-colonial nationalist approaches of the time. When the Ceylon National Congress was formed in 1919, there were several women delegates present at the first session and it was the *Mallika Kulangana Samitiya* (Women's Society) which moved a resolution, albeit an unsuccessful one, at the Congress sessions of 1925 demanding suffrage for Sri Lankan women. This call was later taken up at a public meeting by the Women's Franchise Union which was formed in 1927 to particularly spearhead this demand of women's suffrage. (Jayawardena: 1986: p.128)

Women were visible and vocal, then, in the public arena regarding various political rights be it on issues of independence and self-government, suffrage, or adequate economic and legal rights. In the left movement, women were organizers and participants in the *Suriya Mal* action which, agitating against the sale of poppies for British ex-servicemen on Armistice Day, announced its anti-British stance. Doreen Wickremasinghe was one of the leading organizers of this movement. Many women who went into left-wing politics later cut their political teeth on this *Suriya Mal* campaign.

### The EKP

One of the most eloquent and intriguing women's groups that formed out of the *Suriya Mal* campaign and had links with left-wing politicians was the *Eksath Kantha Peramuna* (The United Women's Front). It was formed in 1947, a year before Sri Lanka obtained independence from Britain, and was the first women's organisation of its kind in the country. Its membership comprised entirely of women who were, in the main, members of the left-wing Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party. Some of its women leaders were married to left-wing politicians. However, amongst its membership were also women who had no party affiliations but were generally left-wing sympathizers.

The leading women in the movement were Doreen Wickremasinghe, Vivienne Goonewardena, Edith Gymroi Ludowyk, Imala Wijewardena, Parameswari Kandiah, Mrs. M.V.P. Pieris, Mrs. Vaikuntavasam, Shirani Jayawardena, Jeanne Pinto, Irangani Meedeniya, Cora Abraham, and Helen Gunasekera who was one of the organization's secretaries. It is clear from this list that the membership encompassed many ethnic groups - Sinhalese, Burghers and Tamils (although the absence of Muslim women stands out), and that amongst its leadership were two foreign women who were married to Sri Lankans - the British Doreen Wickremasinghe and Hungarian Edith Ludowyk. (Jayawardena: 1991: p.33)

The EKP came into prominence with a public rally in March 1948 to celebrate International Women's Day. Its agenda and issues of public interest were given wide publicity in *The Times of Ceylon* by the editor D.B. Dhanapala who was a personal friend of some of its members. The organization was at pains to explain, through this