

VIVIENNE GOONEWARDENA

“La Pasionaria” of Sri Lanka

Kumari Jayawardena

Vivienne Goonewardena's death on October 3rd 1996, soon after her 80th birthday, marks the end of an era of female militant leadership on the Sri Lankan Left. She lived in stirring times - of revolution, labour upheaval, national liberation struggles and the emergence of women as revolutionary leaders, locally and internationally. But it was also a time when women were restrained by feudal customs, by caste taboos, by parental authority and by the obscurantist attitudes to women that existed in society. **It certainly took courage to fight back against the layers of oppression - the family, conservative society, feudal and capitalist structures and against the foreign domination of the country.**

Most of the obituaries of Vivienne commented on her militancy and courage. The President, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, referred to her “fighting spirit and fearless dedication”; the Communist Party called her the “foremost militant woman of the Left”, who was present “wherever there was a struggle” and praised her “bold and determined stand against repression and injustice” (*Sunday Observer*, 6 October 1996). Florence Wickramage, writing on “Vivienne - Woman of the Revolution”, described her “fiery, defiant and determined character” (ibid), and Chitra Wijesekera called her a “rebel” and a “firebrand” (CDN 7 November 1996). Feminists praised her socialist feminism, her “spirited confrontations with the police and her militancy during protests, demonstrations and strikes” (Cats Eye, *Sunday Island*, 20 Sept 1996).

George Mosse in his study on *Nationalism and Sexuality* comments on “**the disdain which established society reserved for male revolutionaries**” but adds that “surpassing the disdain” was the **deep hatred for women as revolutionary figures**”. This, he speculates, is because “woman as a symbol of liberty and revolution.. contradicted the ‘feminine’ values of respectability and rootedness.” Those who did not “live up to the ideal were perceived as a menace to society and the nation, **threatening the established order they were intended to uphold**” (Mosse 1995: 90). The ideal of course was the “good wife and mother” syndrome, the basis of all patriarchal ideologies. Among male revolutionaries themselves, there was often disquiet if not nervous concern about female comrades who boldly opposed the “party line” on key political issues and challenged male leaders on crucial theoretical problems. Such women often acted with greater militancy and aggression than male comrades desired.

The deep hatred of bourgeois society was especially directed to upper - class, educated women, who, in joining revolutionary movements, were crossing the permitted boundaries. They betrayed their class by linking with Left movements; they betrayed their

gender “duties” and “responsibilities” by challenging patriarchy and family roles and their caste, religion and ethnicity by making marriages of their choice and submerging their primordial identities in internationalism. There was strong reaction to such “betrayals” as women were expected to be feminine, obedient, full of *lajja* (shame) *bhaya* (fear) and also be the “Mothers” of the nation, the class and the caste group, devoting their time to reproducing these categories and culturally conditioning and socialising the young into their accepted roles.

The Militant Goonewardenas

What was the actual content of Vivienne's revolutionary militancy and how did a well-brought up girl from a Buddhist *govigama feudal* background become the woman revolutionary with no *lajja* or *bhaya*, who led demonstrations in the streets and once tried to pull an I.G.P. off his horse? From all accounts, the process started early in her life; her family were full of rebels: her mother's father, Boralugoda Ralahamy, had been imprisoned by the British in 1915. In her struggles with the patriarchs, Vivienne, the disobedient daughter, benefited from interaction with maternal uncles and aunts, relationships that in South Asia are usually relaxed and supportive. Her mother's brothers, Philip, Robert and Harry Gunawardena, were noted for their early anti-imperialism; Philip had in the 1920s been a student revolutionary in the USA and was a LSSP founder member, known in Sri Lanka as the Father of the Revolution. Her mother's sister, Caroline, also inspired Vivienne in many ways. As Pulsara Liyanage has written “Aunt Caro should take a bow for that single quality Vivie is most famous for - her courage” (*Lanka Guardian* 15 Sept. 1996). Caroline had been in the thick of politics with her brothers in the early 1930s; she was an active member of the LSSP, and ignoring traditional social orthodoxy, had married a Tamil LSSP comrade, S.C.C. Antonypillai.

Vivienne disobeyed her orthodox father who not only prevented her continuing her University studies but also opposed her marriage to Leslie Goonewardena who was from a *karava* Christian family. Helped by her uncles, she continued her studies and did an external degree. Opposition to her marriage was more severe and Leslie had to file a Habeas Corpus application in the courts to get her out of her father's control; she finally married Leslie in 1939. Thus Vivienne, quite early in life, had rebelled against the caste system in theory and practice, and had asserted a woman's right to education and free choice in marriage. And she defiantly opposed the male chauvinism and bigotry of her father.

Women and the Revolutionary Tradition

Vivienne Goonewardena, born in 1916, was very much a product of her time. She was born into a period marked by women's advance on all fronts including the participation of middle class women in revolutionary movements. Dissidence among women has been an ever-present phenomena. In earlier societies, women had challenged religious and political orthodoxy and championed various heresies, including the belief in the female Messiah and women's equal status, as promoted by Christian non-conformists. But from the period of the French revolution onwards, a distinct feminist critique of patriarchal structures emerged, joining with broad democratic movements against feudal oppression, capitalist exploitation and imperialism.

Dramatic changes had taken place in the lives of middle-class women all over the world in the fifty years between 1875 and 1925, in terms of education, employment, franchise, property rights and sexual freedom. While some such rights could be realized under capitalism, there was also another view that complete equality of the sexes could only be achieved under Socialist society. Hence, the Left movement of these years attracted many women who were concerned with women's liberation and social change.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, in many countries both in Asia and the West, women were among the militant activists and leaders of Utopian Socialist, Social Democratic, Marxist, Anarchist, Syndicalist and Feminist movements, participating in revolutionary political struggles including the October Revolution, trade union movements, anti-imperialist agitation, and battles for equal rights. It was, in many countries, also an era of repression; many revolutionary women leaders were executed or killed, including Sofya Perovskaya (Russia), Rosa Luxemburg, (Germany) Jiu Jin (China) and Kanno Suga (Japan); some spent years in exile or in prison, like Krupskaya, (wife of Lenin) and Angelika Balabanoff, a Russian revolutionary.

While criticising terror tactics as wrong, Marxists praised the commitment and courage of those who resorted to desperate methods. The women Narodniks of Russia who achieved world-wide fame included Vera Zazulich (for shooting a Tsarist official in 1876), Vera Figner, part of a plot that killed a Tsarist General in 1881, and Sofya Perovskaya, hanged in 1881 for her part in assassinating Tsar Alexander II. In Japan, Kanno Suga, an anarchist feminist, was executed in 1909 for plotting to assassinate the Emperor. Another anarchist, Emma Goldman, became renowned as "the enemy of God, law, marriage and the state".

The greatest influence on Vivienne was the Left movement and its outstanding revolutionary women. Significantly many of them came to prominence by their confrontations, disagreements, and oppositional positions in the Communist party; these were, no doubt heightened by their experiences of subordination in society and their struggles to break free of all forms of restraint from fathers and husbands in the home or from the patriarchs of the Left movement. The most inspiring was Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), eminent leader of the SDP (German Social Democratic Party), who

wrote on the accumulation of capital, political revisionism, the mass strike and imperialism, and also made important critiques of nationalism and of the Bolshevik revolution. Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, who had led the Left Opposition of the SPD, later formed the Spartacist group that was involved in an attempted revolution in 1919. This failed, ending in their murder by state forces that year. On her death, Lenin, who had many ideological disputes with her, acknowledged her greatness. ("she was and remains for us an eagle")

Also controversial was the Russian revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952) who not only opposed many of Lenin's policies but also made demands for sexual freedom and the abolition of marriage. In 1921 Kollontai was in the "Workers' Opposition" tendency in the Communist party against Lenin; she also, in theory and practice, raised the issue of women's liberation.

Another inspiration for women of the Left was Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) a leader of the SDP which in 1919 had 20% women members, making it the strongest women's mass movement in Europe. Zetkin clashed with the party when the autonomous organization of women within the SDP was ended and women were integrated into the party. She also opposed the SDP's support for the war in 1914. She left the SDP in 1917 to join the German Communist Party, becoming one of its leaders. In 1910, on her suggestion, March 8th was adopted as International Women's Day and in the 1920s, Zetkin formed a Communist Women's International that brought together women of the Left from around the world.

Vivienne and Left Politics

Vivienne was also motivated by the examples of local women Leftists of the era. The most important was Selina Pieris (later Mrs. N.M. Perera) who was in school with her at Museaus College. Selina participated in the early anti-imperialist struggles and became famous for her confrontations with the police and especially for her journey to the USA to try and cross into Mexico to meet Trotsky. Selina was a strong influence on the younger Vivienne. While in school Vivienne made collections for the anti-imperialist Suriya Mal Movement whose president was Doreen Wickremasinghe. Arriving in Sri Lanka in 1930, Doreen gave leadership to many progressive causes such as female education, and the fight against caste. In the early years of the LSSP there were also other lesser known militant women party members, including the fiery Susan de Silva Caldera, who was a critic of party policies and wrote a pamphlet "How the LSSP was Betrayed."

The Spanish Civil War of the mid 1930s deeply moved the LSSP, and many meetings in support of the Left in Spain were held in Colombo. One symbol of Spanish resistance against fascism was the legendary Dolores Ibarruri, known as "La Pasionaria," considered at the time, to be the greatest living woman revolutionary. She was famous world-wide for her electrifying speeches on behalf of the Republicans and her organization of the resistance during the battle for Madrid; she coined the memorable words against the fascists, "No Pasaran" (they shall not pass), and another of her calls

to battle, "Better to die on your feet than to live on your knees", galvanised thousands of women and men of Madrid into the successful resistance and defence of the city.

While Spain and La Pasionaria fired the imagination for a few years, the long-standing Indian nationalist and Left movements were of greater abiding influence on local Left women. In India there was a revolutionary tradition that drew in women militants; the most prominent abroad was Bhikaiji Cama (1861-1936), a Parsi from Bombay, who in the early 1900s worked with Indian revolutionaries in London and Paris, speaking out for Indian independence, revolutionary change and women's freedom. In later years, many Indian women revolutionaries were active in armed groups and in the Communist movement. The best known was Kalpana Dutt who was part of a group of women revolutionaries (Chhatri Sanga) who participated in the Chittgong Armoury raid in 1930, and in the shooting of British officials. The Communist Party while critical of these actions drew many of these earlier militant women to the party; among them were Kalpana Dutt, who later married P.C. Joshi, the CP General Secretary from 1935 to 1948 and Ushatai Dange (wife of the CP leader S.A. Dange) who organised women workers including those at the British Textile Mills in 1929. The LSSP leaders were also involved in the visits to Sri Lanka of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya - a militant member of the Congress Socialist Party and a famous public speaker.

After the outbreak of the Second World War, when the LSSP was banned, Vivienne, with other LSSP leaders, escaped to India and was in the thick of the nationalist agitations of the epoch, including the historic Quit India agitation of 1942. There was much to learn from the Indian experience for the struggles there were both non-violent and violent, militant and courageous, involving mass agitation, mass arrests and imprisonment of both men and women.

Vivienne's Militancy

Returning to Sri Lanka in 1946 Vivienne aged 30, became the foremost woman leader in the LSSP of the time and campaigned during the 1947 elections when the Left made significant gains. She involved herself in politics, trade union agitation, and women's issues, becoming a Municipal Councillor in 1950, a Member of Parliament (1956-60, 1964-5 and 1970-7) and a member of the Eksath Kantha Peramuna and the LSSP Kantha Peramuna. It was during these years that Vivienne emerged as the most outspoken and daring of the women of the Left, with a reputation for fearlessness in the face of danger. Her battles with the police are legendary; on one occasion during a strike, when a policeman attacked a striker, Vivienne caught him by his belt and shook him hard, an event still remembered.

She had a fierce tongue, quick wit and an ability to indulge in repartee with the coarsest and most boorish of males - including

those in parliament - who taunted her with obscene remarks. She was one of the most vociferous hecklers in parliament, specialising in invective against the UNP leaders and their politics. Despising the correct "etiquette" and traditional lady-like behaviour expected of women of her class and family, she was able to combat family patriarchs, brutal policemen, gangsters, exploitative employers as well as political opponents of the ultra-left and ultra-right including Sinhala chauvinists. She did not hesitate to speak her mind even at the highest levels of her own party, to differ on political issues, with her uncle Philip, with her husband and other party leaders.

Vivienne was always on the move, at meetings, pickets, demonstrations and rallies on May Day or on International Women's Day. She would be out on the streets on political issues, trade union disputes, peace marches, protests on international issues (Vietnam, Mozambique, Palestine, Bangladesh and many more) and in attending meetings abroad on Afro-Asian solidarity and peace.

Vivienne is claimed as a feminist socialist by local feminists who knew her and worked with her on women's issues. She succeeded in linking Leftism in politics with the liberation of women, in spite of the generally patriarchal attitudes of men of the Left in Sri Lanka. The impact of the LSSP women on traditional society was one of the signs of the times, for they combined their revolutionary ardour and a consciousness of the need for socialism with their belief in equality for women. Conservative males even began to criticize Left politics on the ground that it led to the decline of restraints on women. For example, in a novel (Debera Kella) by Piyadasa Sirisena, two characters discuss women's equality. One character with liberal views says:

Traditional conventions dictate, that it is bad for a society to grant political power, political autonomy, freedom to act, access to education, freedom to engage in work and to participate in sports and drama, for women. But a nation cannot progress unless equal opportunities are guaranteed to both sexes.

To which the other character says "Are you a Communist or a Samasamajist?" and adds

Experience has shown repeatedly that women's increasing involvement in areas, which were male dominated, such as employment, decision making and political activity make them aggressive, stubborn, licentious and ignorant. There should be restrictions imposed on their freedom.

But restrictions were what Vivienne and other women of the Left were not willing to tolerate. She broke away, and is remembered today as a woman who was fired with political passion. If there is one message that Vivienne gave the women of this country it is "have no fear". - Vivienne is no more, but She "remains for us an eagle" who soared above the sexism, chauvinism and oppressive structures of our society.