

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*

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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

Tne 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

medium, its political goals and activities. Its articles often took the tone of sarcastic rebuttals of statements made by UNP politicians, and organizations like the Mahila Samiti which it saw as partisan to the British, and later UNP governments.

Immediately after independence, the EKP wrote a rejoinder in *The Times* of 21st February 1948, to those it accused of bandying the word 'socialism' for political gains. John Kotelawela, then Minister of Transport and Works in the UNP government, had published an article in the *Ceylon Daily News* explaining his political philosophy as one of Efficient Socialism. The EKP's rejoinder entitled 'Efficient or Deficient Socialism?' took Kotelawela's statement apart, point by point, arguing that it was nothing more than "capitalism with concessions - just one or two designed to disarm the people." Instead, the EKP reiterated its own commitment to a Marxist economic model for independent Sri Lanka as the democratic way forward:

As such, argued the EKP statement, Kotelawela's preoccupations with taxation, profits, employment and capital were not in keeping with the goals of "real" socialism. His theory of Efficient Socialism was, then, a misnomer.

EKP and the Lanka Mahila Samiti

The EKP had an ambivalent attitude towards the Lanka Mahila Samiti which was the largest women's organisation working towards the empowerment of Lankan rural women at the time. In a statement to the press on the Lanka Mahila Samiti, the EKP took pains to point out that it was not antagonistic towards the LMS, but that it saw the organisation's goal as limited in operating within a capitalist structure of society. ('Women Socialists Warn Lanka Mahila Samiti,' *The Times*, 30/1/48)

The seeds of the Lanka Mahila Samiti were sown when an article appeared in *The Morning Leader* (8th Oct. 1928), suggesting that the Women's Franchise Union which had successfully lobbied for women's franchise, should inaugurate a Women's Institute in Ceylon. At the All Ceylon Social Workers' Conference (15,16 Nov. 1929), Dr. Mary Rutnam gave an address on the scope of the Canadian Women's Institute for which she had worked on a visit to her native Canada in 1921, and its projects for rural women. Almost a year later, in October 1930, a Central Board of Women's Institutes was formed at a large gathering in Colombo, and it was decided that it would call itself the Lanka Mahila Samiti, following the Bengal Mahila Samiti or women's association.

The first village samiti was inaugurated in Pannipitiya on 2nd August 1931. It was through the village school mistress that the convenors of the Mahila Samiti were able to muster the support of village women, and development activities included home gardening projects and competitions, training in native handicrafts, particularly embroidery and spinning and weaving, and the cooking and bottling of fruit preserves, jams and chutneys. As the Mahila Samiti grew as an organisation, a training course was conducted at the Kaduwela Training Centre for Grama and Sweccha Sevikas

(volunteer women workers) on farm work - soil preservation, compost making, fruit and vegetable cultivation, poultry and cattle breeding etc.

In all its projects, the Lanka Mahila Samiti worked closely with government personnel. In the annual report of 1932, the Director of Agriculture is thanked for his assistance in the home gardening projects (p.12), and later, it was at the request of, and with the help of the Education Department that a training course in adult education was set up in which 21 Education Department teachers and 24 samiti volunteers participated.(p.21)

The EKP was careful not to denounce the Lanka Mahila Samiti totally and was in fact unstinting in its praise for the organisation's work. "We recognise the merits of the work" the statement read, "and honour the women whose toil and sweat have gone to their making. Only a fool would decry it. It would be inhuman to condemn it." (*The Times*, 30/1/48) Nevertheless, the EKP criticised the organisation for working within a capitalist and so, exploitative system. Of the Lanka Mahila Samiti's work the EKP noted: "There is no suggestion that any attempt should be made to change the basic economy of the village, or the system responsible for it, but a desire that within the set pattern of life now existing, whatever could be done to help the villagers to make the best of their poor circumstances would be done."

For the EKP this was not good enough. "Like the founders and moving spirits of the Mahila Samiti, we deplore the poverty and degradation of village life" it declared, "But we see our duty not merely to help people to make the best of a bad world, but to understand why it is bad and to help them realize, through experience in fighting for their rights, that they can change it." Unlike the Mahila Samiti, then, which the EKP saw as operating within "the village economy of a slave colony", its goal was to change the village economy itself to a socialist framework.

The EKP approved of the Lanka Mahila Samiti's strategy of obtaining government assistance, urging "Get all the assistance you can from the police, from the government departments, from your local officials". However, it also pointed to the dangers of such alliances. The EKP declared, "The danger of such patronage is most real when it comes from a government or a party in power." It more than hinted that the LMS was being made use of by the United National Party and warned that the government could use the organisation to foreclose any real substantial changes. The "government's ability to give ready effect to trivial reforms or concessions" it warned, allows it to pose "as a friend of the people while deliberately maintaining or strengthening the system responsible for economic backwardness and starvation. Its benevolence is used as a blind to the real issues at stake, while by praising and rewarding the organisers (of the LMS) it encourages in them an attitude of complacency or at best an unfounded optimism."

The EKP rejected too what it saw as the benevolence and patronage of the Mahila Samiti's middle-class women towards those of the village. Quite scathingly it commented: "There will be a tendency for the sensitive, middle-class woman, whose indignation has been

aroused by the appalling condition of life in the villages, to lull her conscience into comfortable sleep after sacrificing some of her time for the alleviation of immediate suffering, thus evading the necessity to face up to the truth." It asked pointedly "Would you, sincere *Mahila Samitiya* helper, consider the standard of life - the housing, medical and educational facilities, the opportunities for recreation and leisure in the most prosperous of your villages, fit for yourselves and your children today?" The consequence of such double standards the EKP warned was "a tendency for the village woman to conclude that middle-class benevolence is all she should expect or hope for. People will tend to accept the general framework of society as unalterable and the only way to progress as (sic) through patronage."

The EKP was not objecting to middle-class involvement per se. Their own ranks were from this class and they justified its involvement at the vanguard in the following terms:

Just as it needed women of the middle class to give a start to the work of the Mahila Samiti, so does our movement need a middle class lead. We appeal therefore to such women who have already shown by their work for the Mahila Samiti that they have a social conscience to consider our stand. If they are in agreement with it, we ask them to have courage and join us too.

EKP and Women's Issues

While the EKP, as an organization consisting entirely of women, was inherently interested in women's issues, from its interventions on political philosophy and governance as seen above, it is clear that it did not limit itself to women's only concerns. Rather, it sought to give a gender perspective on all of the issues it intervened on publicly. The EKP believed, of course, that as a first step, a socialist political economy was essential if women's rights were to be achieved. Edith Gympoi Ludowyk declared in an article entitled 'Feminism or Socialism?' (*The Times*, 1948)

The demand for political rights for women is no doubt a socialist demand, but one which no socialist would stress in isolation, because it would be taken for granted by anyone with a socialist outlook.

Such a multiple focus is evident for instance, in Lila Mendis's attack on the Ceylon National Health Service (*The Times*, 3/12/48). Her emphasis was on the various aspects of a medical service the EKP saw as being on the wrong track. She drew attention to the mortality statistic published by the department of health as being inadequately comprehensive, blamed the "scandalous neglect of elementary sanitary services" for the significant presence of filaria in the suburbs, attacked the system of private practice for encouraging doctors to neglect their public duty, and called upon the state to "guarantee to its every citizen a single standard of medical care" where "patients are free of economic barriers between themselves and the best available medical care." But even as she pointed to these weaknesses in the system, Lila Mendis also paid attention to the issue of women's health. Malnutrition was one of its key factors. She cautioned:

In spite of the apparent improvement which some statistics show, the health of the nation as measured by the stamina of the people, the working capacity of the average man and woman, and the state of health of those babies and mothers who now just pull through, records a definite trend in the wrong direction.

The other issue, one which she called "of fundamental importance" was the state's programme on maternity and child welfare. Criticizing the existing dispensaries and hospitals for not providing women, especially poor women, with enough information on the various stages of their pregnancy and child care, Mendis called for an expansion of information and counselling services for mothers. She stated:

Children are the nation's most valuable possession. Maternity should therefore be provided with every comfort and convenience, with adequate pre-natal and post-natal care. Special attention should be given to providing mothers with thorough information on the bringing-up of their children physically and mentally through child guidance clinics.

All hardships which lie between unprotected motherhood and work should be abolished; that is, a dependable system of infant care - including creches, nursery schools and holiday centres - should be set up.

Equality as Difference

Edith Ludowyk's was one of the first feminist voices in this country to initiate an argument that the women's movement took up later on, making it into a central slogan in feminist campaigns. This was that women's liberation meant an acceptance of difference rather than an absurd sense of sameness with males. In 'Feminism or Socialism' Ludowyk had written:

If socialists fight for women's rights, it does not mean that they want to prove that men and women are alike. Men and women are not alike and it is well that this is so. There are many things which men and women can do equally well; men can do some things better than women and women can do others better than men. Nothing is more foolish than futile comparisons.

The insistence on plurality, of equality for women on the basis of their difference, was, Ludowyk implied, part and parcel of socialist philosophy. The EKP's specific campaigns on women's rights were in keeping with this insistence on equal opportunities. An issue the EKP fought vociferously for was the inclusion of women in the public service. Its strategies were multi-pronged. Consultations were first held between Senator Cissy Cooray and the then Finance Minister on the entry of women into the Ceylon Civil Service. The EKP also took to task the Department of Education for specifying that males only need apply for the General Clerical Services examination. Its petition went up to the Public Services Commission which declared that it was government policy to employ males only in the public service. The EKP then had MP Pieter Keuneman

raise the issue in parliament. When the Finance Minister's reply was that the matter was under consideration, the EKP realized that the government was employing a delaying tactic. It then sought to form a joint front with other organizations to agitate for its demands. Helen Gunasekera, secretary to the EKP, wrote a letter to the *Ceylon Daily News* (3/7/48) announcing the support for its cause of the General Clerical Services Union, the Registered Trained Nurses Association, the Association of Chartered Accountants, the Agricultural Officer's Association, the Association of Government Apothecaries, the United Lanka Congress Party and the LSSP. Letters support from the YMBA and Mr. Sri Nissanka, President of the North Western Province Peasants' and Workers' Front were also listed.

Earlier, an article by Mrs. Gunasekera entitled "How the World Treats its Women" (*CDN*, 19/6/48) had stated the EKP's case through a comparison of the Ceylon government's stand on the issue with those of other countries. Providing a chart which featured 45 countries, Gunasekera listed the global position of women under the headings 1) Less chance of promotion 2) Women employed only in lower grades 3) Equal pay 4) Lower pay than men 5) Marriage bar 6) No marriage bar 7) Full pay Maternity leave. Showing that many countries had opened its doors to women in their respective public services, Gunasekera declared that "The demand for the employment of women in all branches of the public services is not a revolutionary one. But in this, as in many other matters, Ceylon is backward", and drew particular attention to the Indian case stating, "In India, where the status of women is supposed to be more strongly influenced by tradition than in Ceylon, the Government of India Act in 1935 gave Indian women more rights of employment in the Public Services than we enjoy in Ceylon in 1948."

In an article written by a staff reporter on the jobs-for-women campaign, it was noted that the EKP believed "that women in Ceylon should not think in terms of limited concessions but demand a right which is long overdue." The EKP, true to its socialist agenda, did not limit these rights to middle-class women alone, although its campaign for the entry of women into the public service would particularly serve the women of this class. It also drew from women members of various trade unions and campaigned on labour rights, increased pay and other economic issues that were of immediate importance to this sector of women. At the March 8th rally held at the Town Hall to commemorate International Women's Day, these women were given the opportunity to address the large gathering present. Lailamma, who spoke in both Sinhala and Tamil, and Zahara Umma and Ponsinahamy were the women who came forward to either propose or second resolutions which called for the immediate reinstatement of workers who had lost their jobs due to strike action, better housing facilities, and a decrease in the cost of living. The meeting was also addressed in English by Helen Gunasekera, Edith Ludowyke and Vimala Wijewardena who echoed these sentiments. Parameswary Kandiah who spoke in tamil, called for the recognition of the trade union rights of government workers as a fundamental democratic right. (*Lankadeepa*, March 1948)

Here was a gathering, then, that brought together a cross section of society to address issues of public interest in all three languages, appealing to all classes and communities as its constituency. As such, the EKP had shown itself to be a significant coalescing force in the Sri Lankan political life of the time. Its public interventions were always carefully argued, and its strategies for action multi-pronged as in the case of the jobs-for-women-in-the-public-service campaign. In hindsight, its close adherence to the Marxist planned economy may seem naive, and its valorization of women's equality and labour rights in Soviet Russia rather overstated. (See 'Motherhood and a Career do not clash in Soviet Russia' by Doreen Wickremasinghe, *The Times*, 25/7/48) But its presence as an oppositional force to the government of the day justified the wide publicity it received, and its uniqueness as the pioneering socialist feminist group in the country cannot be disputed.

Why, then, did the EKP disband after just one year in the public domain? No doubt, the failure of the left-wing political parties to pull together after independence and continue joint strategies on issues of mutual interest meant that the EKP could no longer articulate a common left-wing political agenda. But its short life-span also points to its marginal position as a women's group within the left-wing political parties themselves. The EKP women's actions, their committee meetings and particular social activities were looked on by their men with benevolence and indulgence. Ultimately this points to both the limited vision of these men in refusing to recognize the women's agitation as a central plank in their own strategy, and the inability of the EKP women themselves to stand on their own feet and spearhead a movement not reliant on the nods of approval of their men.

EKP Legacy

The EKP's legacy is most apparent in the women's organizations or *Kantha Samithis* of the left wing parties. The leadership of the *Kantha Samithi* of the LSSP relied on Vivienne Goonewardena for guidance until her death. The newer left wing parties all have women's wings the formation of which were influenced by the older *Kantha Samithis*.

These organisations however, are more or less dominated by the ideology of the party rather than independent thinking on marxist feminist lines. For example, the *Kantha Samithis* of the constituents of the People's Alliance are inexplicably quiet on the present government's policies on privatization, the expansion of the export processing zones in which many working women are employed and the recent demands by the Public Service Nurses Union and other labour organisations. Further, they have been singularly unable to impact on general party policy and their members are still marginalised into playing a role in the *Kantha Samithi* rather than take active interest in all the activities of the party.

As far as left-wing women activism outside the parties are concerned, one of the most obvious facts about these organizations is that even when their membership is almost exclusively female like for instance the Public Service Nurses Union, or when they represent almost half the membership as in the Ceylon Workers' Con-

gress, their decision making role seems to be limited to just voting powers with a few exceptional women being elected to office. Women have constantly faced the criticism of being divisive in labour organizations, demanding more rights for themselves than keeping in mind the general good of the membership as a whole.

The carefully organized campaign lead by the Public Service Union on maternity rights could be cited as an example of positive union activism. However, the result of shorter working hours for pregnant and lactating women was confined to women who work eight hours per day thus removing from its ambit the countless women who are employed six hours a day as teachers. On the other hand, a 1995 circular restricting maternity leave for unmarried women in the public service to those who can prove that their pregnancy was a result of a rape was withdrawn after protest from the Public Service Union. This was one of the few recent occasions on which the Union acted together with several women activists:

One of the striking features of the EKP was the representative nature of its membership. Although almost all of them were either members of, or connected in some way to the left parties, the differences between these parties seemed to have been ignored by the EKP. Many of their meeting were conducted in all three languages and although the leadership was almost exclusively middle-class, the membership included urban working women and rural agriculture based women.

The *Kantha Samithis* and other women's organizations have, ever since the demise of the EKP, joined together on many occasions to agitate on issues of common interest such as the rise in cost of living, disarmament and peace, the repressive activities of State Forces. They have joined pan party/ organization fronts to agitate on many issues. However, the interest in these fronts as far as the *Kantha Samithis* are concerned seem to be only on a short term basis. In order perhaps, to fight the common political enemy. The *Kantha Samithis* retire into their party headquarters as soon as summoned to concentrate on something else.

Thus, the once successful and much hailed Mothers' Front which drew for its membership women from all over the country seems to have lost its pan-island outlook with the appointment of the new PA government, the disappearances and arbitrary arrests of tamil youth going virtually unnoticed by the same women's organizations which were so active on the issue of disappearances only a few years ago.

The other problem that *Kantha Samithis* face is the lack of a continuing and complex ideological examination of issues. For instance, although all of them are quite comfortable with slogans like "reduce the price of goods", when it comes to other issues that face women today such as sexual violence and armed conflict, these organizations are deafeningly silent. The LSSP newspaper the *Samasamaja* for instance, does not contain a separate page for the work and issues of the *Kantha Samithi* nor contain many news items regarding their activities. The same was true of the Communist Party of Sri Lanka's newspapers, the *Aththa* and the *Forward*.

Thus, alarmingly, and disappointingly, if one were to sum up the legacy of the EKP in one sentence, it would be "toe the party line". It is time that the socialist feminist movement of Sri Lanka (if indeed it exists) spends some time concentrating on what the EKP did achieve in identifying ideological issues and the possible levels at which it could enter mainstream politics in Sri Lanka most effectively.

Works Consulted

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Extracts from a speech made by Ms. Vivienne Goonewardene, MP, in Parliament on 2nd June 1956 in the course of the debate to make Sinhala the only official language of the country

I would like to remind the House once again of our stand. Just as the Sinhala people can use their language in the course of their dealings with the state, so should the Tamil people have the right to do so in their own language. This is the principle on which we stand.....

Our efforts are to forestall a calamity that may befall this country. We say that we should not fall prey to chauvinism; while allowing both the Sinhala and Tamil communities to exist as such, we should also make it possible for them to live together as Lankans....

I earnestly request the government, if they are to peace in this country and its future development, not to look at this problem on a discriminatory basis. This problem cannot be solved on that basis. It is only on the basis of a united country and a united people that a planned programme of development can be implemented.