

BERNADEEN SILVA: CHRISTIAN, PATRIOT, INTERNATIONALIST

Suriya Wickremasinghe

Bernadeen was my senior at Peradeniya University, overlapping with me for one year. I barely know her then, but retain to this day a vivid mental image of the expressive face of that vivacious and spirited undergraduate. Knowing she was a devout Catholic, and fearing – as one was wont to do in the climate of the time – that she was also likely to be bigoted and right wing, I kept a respectful distance despite her attractive personality. How wrong I was!

In the 1960s and early 1970s I came across Bernadeen again, in pursuit of the various great causes of that era – freedom for the Portuguese colonies in Africa, the liberation movements of South Africa and what was then Southern Rhodesia, opposing the Vietnam war. These were ad hoc encounters when like-minded individuals and groups got together for a particular enterprise. Subsequently we formed the Africa Freedom Committee to coordinate various groups and individuals for action; its address was Bernadeen's flat, No. 60/2 Barnes Place.

Bernadeen was always in the forefront, and often more impassioned and outspoken than the leftist activists with whom I had hitherto been familiar. One never had to inform or entice her on such issues, the consciousness and initiative was more likely to be hers. She felt, as did many other Christians, particularly appalled that the government of a Catholic nation was guilty of shameful oppression of the peoples of Angola, Mozambique, and Portuguese Guinea. We took to the streets in comradesly fervour. Thus was our personal and enduring friendship cemented on the pavements outside the Colombo Legation of Dictator Salazar's Portugal. The JVP insurrection of April 1971 resulted in these ad hoc encounters turning into a permanent working relationship

which continued till Bernadeen's devastating death in 2007. Bernadeen was one of the handful of people who actively planned the formation of the Civil Rights Movement; others at the informal preliminary discussions were Regi Siriwardene, Kumari Jayawardena, Nihal ("Bandy") Perera and his wife Max, Desmond Fernando and the writer.

The 80th birth anniversary of Bernadeen Silva, who died two years ago, fell on 20 May 2009.

This article is from the forthcoming commemorative volume *Remembering Bernadeen* published by the Women's Educational and Research Centre, and edited by Selvy Thiruchandran, Suriya Wickremasinghe and Deepika Udagama. Bernadeen Silva was a founder member of the Social Scientists' Association.

Another claim on our attention at this time was the appalling events in Pakistan. The Committee for Human Rights in East Bengal—subsequently renamed Ceylon Committee for Solidarity with Bangla Desh (sic later Bangladesh)—was formed, and of course Bernadeen was among its members. Once again we took to the streets, notably outside the Savoy Cinema where a seven-day film festival organized by the Pakistan government was being held. This time around protest was more dicey as emergency regulations were in force banning demonstrations. There is a tale here to be told another time.

Now, however, our anguish at events unfolding across the Bay of Bengal was matched by that we felt for what was happening at home in the aftermath of the April uprising. CRM was officially launched in November 1971 under the chairmanship of Professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra, with R.K.W. Goonesekere as deputy chairman and Regi Siriwardena as Secretary. Bernadeen was treasurer and active Working Committee member for the rest of her life. CRM's simple Statement of Aims was the "protection and promotion of the civil liberties of the people of Ceylon at all times", which the statement regarded as "a necessary accompaniment to radical social and economic change and the movement towards an egalitarian society." The text then continued to say that as its immediate task CRM would concern itself with "the restoration of certain rights and liberties that have recently been suspended", in particular citing media freedom,

the rights of persons in custody, revocation of the emergency regulation enabling disposal of dead bodies without inquests, and the restoration of trade union and other rights of employees.

We soon found ourselves castigated in Parliament as traitors, defenders of the reactionary capitalist class, supporting terrorism and participating covertly on the other side in treason. How commonplace such charges are today! Then, however, we were surprised – surprised, but by no means deterred. Much more daunting was trying to cope with the stream of desperate pleas for information about missing persons, with enquiries as to why someone was still in detention, with the letters that started coming from prisons, and so it went on. And on.

Steeped in the tradition of international solidarity, we now looked for a little of it for our own country's problems. Here again we were to be disappointed. Governments and groups with one sort of orientation or affiliation were hesitant to take a position because they felt here was a democratically elected government, threatened by an uprising of dangerous Marxist insurgents. Those of the "other" orientation saw a "progressive" Government in which there were Marxist parties, what's more Marxists of both the Communist and the Trotskyite variety, so ipso facto the insurgency had to be a right-wing CIA fed neo-imperialist conspiracy! To our relief we stumbled on Amnesty International which was totally disinterested in the political affiliations of either the government or the insurgents and only wanted the facts please, and again the facts, about persons in detention, trial procedures, allegations of torture and disappearances, and so on and so forth.

CRM's early meetings were held in Bernadec's flat 60/2 Barnes Place, and later at her home in Don Carolis Road, which remained the official address of CRM and the venue of its AGMs until CRM graduated to separate premises in 1988. Her loyalty and commitment to CRM was unflinching. She never missed a Working Committee meeting, and participated actively in discussions on policy and suggestions for action on the myriad different issues of civil liberties that have bedeviled our country over the past 36 years.

If Bernadec had any fault it was her over-scrupulousness in never seeking personal help from even good friends and colleagues. I remember discovering that she and her husband had a troublesome legal problem, and taking her almost by force to S. Nadesan QC, whom she already knew well over many years of working together in CRM. He was astounded,

gave her the telling off of her life for having even thought that she should not "bother" him, took the whole affair in hand and pursued it with his characteristic skill and tenacity to a right and successful conclusion.

Bernadec was simple in her lifestyle: she was also full of fun. She didn't wear her religion on her sleeve but expressed it in the integrity and compassion of her character and her actions. She was deeply religious in a way that won the admiration and respect of non-believers such as myself. As another non-believer emailed me on hearing of her death:

I think I met her a few times and thought she was nice and unassuming and genuine and strong in a gentle way. Some Christians are indeed like that, and it's humbling when you meet people who actually live in practice what they believe, unanctimoniously and with a sense of humour and not judgmental about others who don't share their beliefs (although sometimes you wonder if you might be a better person if you did).

Bernadec's passion was balanced by humility, her vehement insistence on standing by principle was untainted by any trace of aggression or self-righteousness. While the main focus of her life was the many-faceted Centre for Society and Religion, where she worked from its inception with Mr Ussa Balasuriya, she gave of herself to secular organizations such as CRM, PAFREEL, the Nadesan Centre, and WERC, in the same way as to religiously-affiliated ones. She was also deeply involved in work to help former mental patients to realise not simply their capability, but also their right, to reintegrate into society, and drove regularly each week to Wattala to a "Halfway House" for such persons. The pursuit of social justice was the cause dearest to her heart, and the diversity of the many articles she contributed to the journal of that name is remarkable. Her training as a librarian and documentalist were of special value to the many organizations with which she worked. But she was never so happy as when in the field, driving long distances to monitor elections with tireless vigour and unflinching good humour. She was a good person through and through, the like of which we sorely need but I fear we may not see again.

Associated with the organization at its inception were Chairman: E.R. Sarachandera (Professor of Sinhala, University of Ceylon); Deputy Chairman: R.K.W. Goonesekere, (Principal, Ceylon Law College); Secretary: Reggie Siriwardene (Writer); Ven. Puhulwella Wimalawansa Thero (lecturer, Vidyodaya University); Ven. Puthagama Gnanarama Thero; Ven. Matara Chandarama Thero; Ven. Ratgama Sumanananda Thero; Rt. Rev Leo

Nanayakkara, OSB, (Bishop of Kandy); Rt. Rev Lakshman Wickremesinghe (Bishop of Kurunegala); Rev. Father Tissa Balasuriya OMI (former Rector, Aquinas University College); Fr. Daniel Fernando; L. Ariyawansa (teacher, trade unionist); Tissa Abeysekera (writer); Cora Abraham (Art teacher); Mervyn Casie-Chetty J.P.U.M. (proctor); I.J. Mark Cooray (Reader, Ceylon Law College); Dr C.C. de Silva (Professor Emeritus); D.B. Ellepola (former Director of Rural Development); Desmond Fernando (Advocate); Dr. Carlo Fonseka (Faculty of Medicine); H.A.I. Goonetilleke (University Librarian, Peradeniya); A.J. Gunawardena (University Lecturer); Indika Gunawardena (trade unionist); Richard Gabriel (Artist); Leslie Gunawardena (University lecturer); D.C.R. Gunawardena (former Ambassador); H.M.

Jayatissa Herath (Advocate); Prof. Ashley Ilalpe (Dean, Arts Faculty, Peradeniya); Prof. Laksiri Jayasuriya (University Lecturer); Kumari Jayawardena (University lecturer); George Keyt (artists); Ilirischandra Mendis (advocate); S. Nadesan QC ; Prof. T. Nadaraja (Dean, Law Faculty, Colombo University); Prof. Gananath Obeyesekera (lecturer); Lester James Pieris (film maker); J.A.K. Perera (trade unionist); P. Nihal Perera (Chartered Accountant); Gerald Pieris (University lecturer); N.D.M. Samarakoon QC; Laki Senanayake (artist); Nimal Senanayake (Advocate); Bernadeen Silva (librarian); J.W. Subasinghe (Advocate); Vinnie Virbharana (University lecturer); Suriya Wickremesinghe (Advocate); W.M.K. Wijemuge (University lecturer). ■

