

missal of 236 textile workers who went on strike on 20 February 1991 in support of the trade union they had formed in November 1990. The company argued that it had no legal obligation to extend recognition of the trade union despite its representation of the overwhelming majority of its workforce and refused to comply with requests by government mediators for reinstatement of those dismissed on the ground that it fell within the definition of an essential service under emergency regulations.

However, vacation of post which takes place automatically is not the only ill consequence. The absenting worker has committed an offence punishable with a fine of between Rs. 500 and 5000 and rigorous imprisonment from three months to five years; in addition, all his movable and immovable property are forfeit to the Republic.

It is not only the worker who is at risk. Any person who incites or encourages any worker in an essential service to absent himself from work is also guilty of an offence and shall suffer the same consequences.

The regulation also falls heavily on any organization which, in the opinion of the President, is committing or aiding and abetting the commission of these offences. The President can proscribe any such organization; thereupon all its members lose their jobs and are deemed to have committed an offence punishable as indicated earlier. Membership is here the automatic offence, regardless of whether the particular member supported or opposed the action.

These obnoxious regulations have been in force for some years and are currently in force. They have been used by employers to stifle trade union activity. That the government has not, to our knowledge, gone to the extent of prosecuting offenders or of forfeiting their property is no reason for tolerating their presence as part of our legal system.

The trade union movement must carry on its campaign until all these anti-democratic regulations are rescinded.

Charles Abeysekera

POEMS OF SIVARAMANI

INTRODUCED BY SITRALEGA MAUNAGURU

The two poems published below were written by Sivaramani, who killed herself on May 19, 1991 at the age of twenty three in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Sivaramani lived and died in a place where the act of suicide is glorified and praised as the ultimate symbol of patriotism. Sivaramani, however, did not die by swallowing a cyanide capsule or leaping at a target with a bomb-fitted bodice, and thus was not praised as a martyr. Instead, her action will go unnoticed and even be ridiculed as an act of cowardice.

Sivaramani's death is a tragic indicator of the level of desperation and hopelessness she suffered in a climate of social and political upheaval. Her poems serve as a testimony of such personal struggle. On the day of her suicide, Sivaramani burned all her poems that she could get hold of. These are some of the twenty three that survived.

These poems capture the wartime reality of Jaffna in unusual, powerful images and raise critical questions. Through these poems, Sivaramani expresses her sensitivity towards the current situation, particularly in Jaffna, where all avenues of criticism have been shut down.

These poems bear profound witness to her unease over the decay of civil society and the continuing silence towards political authoritarianism. In addition to this general atmosphere of frustration, as a woman she had to confront the social conservatism that is very harsh towards independent and critical-minded women.

Sivaramani fought with all her might to uphold her aspirations and ideals. There were many instances when she was ridiculed when she stood for the rights of women. Perhaps, she realised that she could not keep her dreams and ideals alive in a society which tried so persistently to make her compromise with its conservatism.

Other important poets have committed suicide. These are not mere incidents. They tell us about the personality of the poets, their struggles, and the society in which they lived. Sometimes, an individual's vehement protest against the oppression of society takes the form of suicide. Sivaramani's was one such.

These poems were translated by a group of Tamil poets and scholars. A collection of Sivaramani's poems will be published soon.



1

In a night
of war
pressure-filled
the young ones
grow up.

Across the paths
of their mornings
like delicate birds
are thrown
blood soaked
faceless bodies,
walls crumble
on their spirited laughter
our young
are young
no more.

A burst of gunfire
shatters the stillness
of a star-filled sky
destroying the meaning
of children's stories.

In the little
that is left
of day they forget
to make chariots
of palmyrah nuts
and play kilithatu
Then they learn
to shut the cadjan
fence on time
and differentiate
between the barkings
of a dog,
not to question
and be silent
when questions
possess no answers,

like sheep
they have learned
all of this

To tear off
the wings of insects
make guns
from sticks and logs
kill friends
thinking them enemies,
these are the games
our children play.

In a night
full of pressure
during war
our young have grown up.

2

In the evenings
all burdens
weigh heavily.

Inevitably
heat and light
shimmer
on the lifeless day
like writings
on a slate
that rub off to
leave no trace,

I count my breaths
not merely
to pass time.

Fireflies
fall dead
by the lamp
what should I
dwell on?
Fireflies?
Or the stars
shining
with no meaning
like the light

that emits
from a corpse's eye?

Truth
is not visible
in this darkness.
To discern untruths
is not an easy task.

But my younger sister
preparing for exams
I cannot ask
what motivates you
why you peer in this darkness?

All are in a hurry
I am left
with only memories

Outside,
calm, silent trees
cast torn shadows
when anguish
and chaos
rule the streets
with barking dogs
and locked doors
checked and rechecked
in readiness for night,
I cannot think
of the Sun
rising tomorrow.

The night
is important to me
like yesterday
another friend
maybe lost
in this dark.

The night;
It is valuable
to me.

(Translated from Tamil)

